

Dhaka, Friday, March 29, 1991

Planning Commission Faces a New Role

by Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmed

THE Prime Minister has touched the right chord when she declared, soon after taking the oath of office, that the task of reconstructing the shattered economy will be taken up earnestly. She has also said that the first priority of her government is to provide food and clothing to the teeming millions who are now deprived of these most basic of the basic needs. These statements reflect the economic needs and hopes of the people and recognize the crucial importance of addressing the poverty problem of the people to the on-going process of transition democracy.

Although constitutionally the President is the chief executive and the Prime Minister and ministers are his advisers, given the process through which the new Prime Minister has come to assume her office, she has an authentic role; and, no doubt, the appointment of the ministers and allocation of their portfolios have been made on her advice. This means that, notwithstanding the constitutional dispensation, de facto power lies with the Prime Minister and her party, BNP. Therefore it is not the President but the Prime Minister who will be credited by people with the responsibility of all

governmental decisions and actions and their consequences since her induction as Prime Minister. The economic problems faced by Bangladesh constitute an intriguing challenge. In facing it one may glibly talk about the efficacy of market forces, but there can be no disputing that there is a very important role of planning and governmental interventions in the extremely poor and highly differentiated economy of Bangladesh. The actions to be taken toward achieving food security for the poor, as im-

posed by the statements of the Prime Minister noted earlier, cannot be in good measure, be interventionist in nature. Targeted programmes and projects are needed to effectively reach the poor who suffer from lack of access to both productive resources and employment. Also, to accelerate the rate of growth which is sine qua non for poverty alleviation, planned development efforts focusing on sectors and activities having growth potential are needed. Moreover, foreign aid, on which virtually the

total development budget is now dependent, is sought and received on the basis of planned programmes and projects. There is no need to labour the point further that development planning has a crucial role to play in Bangladesh. There is therefore an important role of the Ministry of planning, particularly the planning commission. But there has been a serious erosion of the status and the role of the Planning Commission during the 1980s. In some re-

analyses and resources toward promoting development for the benefit of the people. While the overall approach should be politically determined, the members of the Planning Commission are expected to provide the technical leadership in charting out policy options and best courses of action, given various constraints. In India, for example, members of the Planning Commission, who are usually drawn from among professionals and academia and from independent sectors, resign when a government changes to

uncertainty, lack of adequate data for preparing a five-year plan and inadequacy of technical capability of the Planning Commission at that time. It was proposed that the two-year period would be utilized to improve the data base and strengthen the capability of the Planning Commission. But, unfortunately, the technical capability of the Planning Commission to-day is, if anything, lower than in 1978 due to the policies pursued by the government during the 1980s.

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spects, the Planning Commission became virtually a post box routinely processing projects. It is well-known that five-year plans prepared in the past had little relevance to the realities of the situation, and that there was large scale flouting of plan disciplines starting from the presidency of the Fourth Five Year Plan may already have become an irrelevant document in many respects. It is therefore urgently necessary to have a serious look at the various aspects of development

of the Ministry of Finance on the time of the minister is likely to be greater. Members of the Planning Commission during 1980s were mostly bureaucrats and the legacy continues with all the present members of the commission being bureaucrats. To be sure, planning is not simply an accounting or an administrative exercise. It is in the main about policies, linkages, economic interactions, consistencies, institutional arrangements; and, above all, marshalling of ideas,

enable the incoming government to appoint members of its choice to pursue development planning reflecting the political directions it enunciates. The practice is a recognition of the fact that development planning is a serious business for a government in a developing country.

It may be recalled here that the government of President Ziaur Rahman decided in 1978 in favour of a two-year plan for the period 1978-80. The reason given included political

There has been no serious attempt to revamp the commission's capability while many functionaries retired or moved on to other organizations.

The government will be well advised to address the issue of the role of development planning in Bangladesh urgently and, having determined that, to assign an appropriate status to the Planning Commission and provide it with appropriate and adequate leadership at ministerial and membership levels and take steps to strengthen its technical capability for it to be able to discharge its responsibilities efficiently toward achieving the national developmental goals.

Private Sector in SAARC

It is a welcome news for the private sector here that the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is currently engaged in a number of studies which are all designed to set up frameworks for collaboration among business communities of member nations of the five-year old alliance.

To do the first thing first, two possibilities mentioned by the SAARC Secretary General, K. K. Bhargava, should be tackled without much delay. Both these two ideas may be the easiest ones for implementation. One is the setting up of a SAARC Chamber of Commerce, while the other calls for SAARC Business Council. With both the projects still under study, the respective functions of the two proposed bodies are yet to be defined. It is important that representatives of the existing national trade bodies, such as the Chambers of Commerce and Industries, should get together and discuss among themselves what they can do under the umbrella of a SAARC Chamber of Commerce or, for that matter, under that of the Joint Business Council. Objectives and functions of the two bodies should evolve from within, instead of being dictated by civil servants working at the SAARC Secretariat.

These business representatives may well decide on some modest and realistic steps to increase co-operation among themselves in such fields as intra-regional trade, export promotion in foreign markets and exchange of technological know-how in the industrial field. In this context, they should study prospects for organising SAARC trade delegations to foreign countries, joint exhibitions and fairs and consultations with, say, EEC and ASEAN secretariats. Such collective efforts will cut costs and, what's more important, demonstrate to the outside world as to what SAARC nations are ready to do together for themselves and the region.

When co-operation in these areas has been institutionalised and strengthened, the grouping would know how far it can go in undertaking more ambitious and innovative projects than the setting up of a SAARC Chamber of Commerce. In an interview just given to the press in Bombay, Mr Bhargava has hinted at the possibility of a SAARC Common Market, although he has avoided mentioning any time frame. It is certainly a possibility that deserves careful long-term study, although many would regard it as slightly utopian, one which has so far eluded the six-nation alliance in Southeast Asia, the ASEAN. But it is important to introduce measures aimed at liberalising trade among the nations, especially involving commodities which figure in smuggling operation.

The climate for co-operation among the SAARC countries has never been more congenial than it is today. To varying degrees, all the seven countries have made their strong commitments to the promotion of the private sector as well as to co-operation with foreign capital. Above all, with democratic regimes gaining strength in a number of South Asian nations, including Bangladesh, the latent energies of the private sector have been released, ready to be used at national and regional levels. We cannot let this opportunity pass. Once the tempo is gone, it may be difficult to revive the innovative zeal that remains the greatest asset of our private sector.

Renewing Our Theatre

It was International Theatre Day last Wednesday. This is particularly relevant to Bangladesh, as theatre is playing an increasingly important role in the country's social and cultural development. Theatre in Bangladesh has, since its birth in early 1973, acquired a dedicated group of performers and an appreciative audience. In an entertainment-starved Dhaka, theatre provides an escape, but not escapism, since the plays carry a great deal of intellectual weight. Over the years, the numerous performing groups have become a forum from which to propagate free thought and expression, to protest censorship and repression, to promote Bengali culture, and at the same time remain receptive to other cultures.

Despite having such a crucial role, theatre in this country has remained a neglected area. Demands for a theatre complex with a proper stage, greenroom, training and rehearsing facilities, have gone unheeded by the government. Public appetite for avant-garde as well as traditional productions is healthy, yet, due to lack of facilities, theatre is now passing through a critical stage.

This free-thinking and critical medium may have been anathema to governments in the past, but we have now entered a different arena where "democracy" is the watch word. Therefore, a change of attitude in the corridors of power is not only desirable, but expected as a matter of course. Apart from stage facilities, there are other ways to encourage and assist technical and artistic innovations.

One is, of course, subsidies. But perhaps more important is interaction with theatre groups in other countries. There is a great movement in avant-garde theatre productions in other Asian countries such as India, Singapore, the Philippines and Korea. State-sponsored exchanges, within or outside bilateral cultural agreements, would help to open up a new horizon to our theatre directors and performers. We cannot expect our theatre movement to survive, let alone flourish, by keeping it imprisoned in an insular cultural environment. A new generation of audience waits expectantly, but their wait is likely to be in vain if we fail to allow our theatre renew itself.

For the past 18 years, hard-working and dedicated theatre workers have carried the burden, for meagre pay and little recognition from the government, while at the same time enriching television by providing it with some of its best directors, playwrights and actors. Even in an age when money has become an all-powerful commodity, most theatre performers remain true to the essential idealism of the art. But even that idealism can no longer be taken for granted. Old spirits have to be renewed, and new one ignited. Radical improvements and innovations are needed, which cannot be carried out by resources at the disposal of theatre groups themselves. It is now time for the government to play its proper role.

Apartheid Law-scrapping could Leave Mini-homelands

Arthur Maimane writes from Cape Town

The South African parliament is now debating the repeal of the key Acts which have imposed apartheid on the country for so long. The business is due to be completed when the session ends in June. So many laws have been imposed over the last 40 years, it is proposed that many individual Acts should be wiped out by proclamation of the President. The African National Congress is unhappy about the government proposals on land ownership.

ON the day the South African government published a White Paper for the repeal of the two Land Acts, two MPs from the official opposition Conservative Party were ejected from the all-white House of Assembly.

One had called Home Affairs Minister Gene Louw "scandalous" and the other had minutes later shouted: "The minister's lying again."

The right-wing Conservative Party, led by Andre Treurnicht, was opposing the introduction of identity cards that would no longer state the holder's race, as required so far by the Population Registration Act. It is one of the last three cornerstones of apartheid President F W de Klerk intends to scrap by the end of the parliamentary session in June.

When, on February 2, de Klerk told parliament he would repeal the three laws during the session he was opening, the official opposition walked out in protest, insulting his reformist government.

The Conservative MPs, who are to serve on the joint committee that will consider the Land Acts repeal White Paper, will realise they have little to oppose. The best news they will have for their party is that the land will not be redistributed, as demanded by the African National Congress (ANC) and other liberation movements.

Three senior cabinet ministers said on the day the paper was published that after the five Bills necessary to enact

the repeals are passed, there will at last be no discrimination in the buying of land and property. Everybody will be free to live wherever they can afford to buy.

It emerged under questioning that white supremacists will still be free to impose private apartheid in areas they prefer to keep as pure white enclaves—a series of mini-homelands 'dotted about the country.

De Klerk has spoken about protecting communities with "shared values and lifestyle" in non-racial constitution that is still to be negotiated.

Minister of Planning Hernus Kriel had a different phraseology. With apartheid dismantled, communities would still be free "to decide on their norms and standards."

Kriel explained that because South African Common Law did not permit racial discrimination it had been necessary

since 1948, when the National Party came to power, to pass vast amounts of legislation to impose its apartheid policies—"social engineering," Minister of Development Aid Stoffel van der Merwe called it.

The government has now come full circle and hopes by June to have wiped out all those laws passed over 43 years.

The repeal of the Land Acts (passed by earlier government in 1913 and 1936), which restricted black ownership to 13 per cent of the land, will make it possible for them to buy land anywhere and even get loans from the Land Bank that at present helps only white farmers.

If, after the repeal, white farmers in a particular area do want such a neighbour the law will not protect his rights. The farmers will "decide norms and standards," in Kriel's

words, of who farms with them.

The same applies to rented property in urban areas. White tenants already in residence can keep out other races by using the same loopholes to protect their "shared values and lifestyles," in De Klerk's words.

Kriel argued to the press that it is not unreasonable for a landlord to turn away any applicant "because he doesn't like his face."

That might be acceptable common practice if the colour of the face does not matter. But here it does. The minister dismissed the suggestion of passing anti-discrimination laws such as those operating in other heterogeneous countries, like Britain and the United States.

They would, he said, not be "worth the paper they would be written on" because racists

would find ways round the legislation. Common Law could be used to take discriminatory landlords to court.

It was pointed out to the three ministers that repeal of the last three cornerstones of apartheid would put South Africa only in the position the US was in before the civil rights movement held freedom marches in the early Sixties. This, too, was dismissed.

The government hides behind the excuse that it did not create apartheid, only developed it from the land seizures and conquests of the last three centuries. And it will be protected from the controversial and vote-losing-effects of repealing apartheid.

The White paper says it would be impossible—and could cause conflict—to give back to black people the land taken away from them by forced removals during the government's years of "social

engineering." Van der Merwe said restitution, and even reparations, would be "destructive" rather than constructive. And, anyway, the minister observed, more land was taken from whites than from blacks-to create new homes for them after they were forcibly removed from their traditional lands.

Too many laws have been imposed over the last 40 years for them to be repealed by individual.

Acts of Parliament. To hasten the reforms, the White Paper proposes granting the State President authority to dismantle apartheid by proclamation on the advice of a committee.

All these Acts dismantling apartheid could themselves be repealed by a majority government under a non-racial constitution.

The ANC was not consulted on the White Paper, which it has condemned. It has already published a document detailing its own intentions for the landless after their liberation.—

GEMINI NEWS

ARTHUR MATMANE made his name as one of talented group of journalists who ran Drum Magazine in Johannesburg in the Fifties and Sixties. In exile in Britain he worked for BBC World Service. Now he is back in South Africa as Parliamentary correspondent for the Johannesburg Weekly Mail.

Cory Govt Hastens Industry Dispersal to the Countryside

Manolo B. Jara writes from Manila

THE Aquino Government has put in place a program aimed at hastening the dispersal of industries to the countryside and boosting exports.

"Trade and industrial activity cannot forever be focused in Metro Manila," says the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) in explaining the program.

As such, DTI adds, there is an urgent need to disperse industries to the countryside where the bulk of the unemployed and underutilised natural resources are located.

The program calls for the establishment of 16 Regional Industrial Centres (RICs) throughout the country. Four of these centres have already been established—one in Lu-

zon, one in Central Philippines and two in Mindanao in Southern Philippines.

President Aquino herself launched the Luzon project known as "Calabarzon". It derives its name from the five provinces participating in the program: Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal and Quezon.

These centres are to operate similar to the Export Processing Zones already in operation in various parts of the country.

In the Calabarzon project, for instance, industrial estates have been approved by the Board of Investments. These are mostly private ventures, with investments ranging from 300 million pesos (US\$10.7 million) to as high as 1.9 bil-

lion pesos (US\$67.8 million). Similar centres have been established in Iloilo in Central Philippines and General Santos City and Cagayan de Oro City in Mindanao.

As the DTI puts it, "The establishment of these centres has greatly supported the continued flow of investments into the countryside and augur well for the creation of jobs in areas where unemployment is greatest."

The establishment of these centres gains added significance in the light of the unprecedented growth in government-approved investments in the last five years. According to the DTI, investments surged from 3.8 bil-

lion pesos (US\$135.7 million) in 1986 to 108 billion pesos (US\$3.9 billion). This meant a 195 per cent average annual growth for the period.

The DTI adds that approved investments over the last three years have surpassed targets by as much as 150 per cent.

The bulk of these investments, or 69 per cent, has flowed into the countryside, registering a 262 per cent average annual growth for the past five years.

Manufacturing absorbed most of the investments, accounting for close to 128 billion pesos (US\$4.6 billion), or 56.2 per cent of the total. In this sector, textiles and wearing apparel were the leading

investment areas.

"All these investments, however, will lose their meaning if jobs are not created," the DTI says. "The Board of Investments therefore took pains in ensuring that such jobs were created. As a result, about 1.4 million jobs, directly or indirectly, were created over the past five years."

One of the major factors for the surge in investments, the DTI notes, has been the implementation of simplified procedures and documentation.

Today, it says, it takes an average of 15 days to process documents for project approvals, which is below the 20-day deadline set by the law. In addition, project appli-

cations which used to require seven different types of documents now need only one simplified document.

These changes, DTI says, become even more impressive when viewed against the requirements of some of the ASEAN members. ASEAN is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations composed of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

The DTI says that in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, the processing time takes about 60 to 90 days. These countries also require from 29 to 59 items in investment applications as against 20 in the Philippines, it adds. —Depthnews

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.

Eid shopping

Sir, Even though Eid is still far away the already converging crowd at various marketing centres reminds us how we wait eagerly each year to celebrate Eid. The most important part of this festival has become the wearing of new clothes.

Lately, we notice that even men or for that matter young boys have become quite aware of how they dress. And what could be a more appropriate time than the Eid to make new and fashionable dresses! So we notice a huge

crowd of young men and boys moving at different market places in the city, in search of the right kind of dress for themselves.

We welcome this new trend in our society. It gives the festivity a treat! Because, I must hope, when donning new apparels they would ofcourse be giving away the old ones to their poor fellow beings.

Ramza Rouf
Banani, Dhaka.

Craze for money

Sir, A news item says that a man named Liu, of China, made 1,635 dollars,

by selling eighteen people, between 1985 and 1990.

However, the saddest as well as the most surprising part of the story was that in a bid to make money, he did not even spare his immediate family members. It is indeed amazing to note that he did not stop at making business out of selling his mother, his wife, and even his very own three-year-old daughter.

This speaks volumes about the vice of greed. His craze or, in other words, 'love' for money, made him blind of all other 'lovely' human feelings.

Eventually, however, he was executed. A rightful punishment for a crime of this dimension.

We hope that those criminals who are thinking of such crimes, should become careful and think

before committing such terrible acts.

Shahexd Zaman
Banani, Dhaka.

Mishuk — self-driven

Sir, I do not know if the manufacturers of Mishuk auto-rickshaws are planning to introduce a model suitable for personal, private and family use; to be used as a mini personal transport vehicle in lieu of the car; self-driven by the middle-class owner.

I could buy one for around Taka 60,000-75,000; compared to a couple of lakh Taka for a used car. The body has to be modified. The potential buyers are those who have no social fixation on cars. In fact the middle class could meet the need of a personal vehicle for city use (either alone for business/office or with a small

family).

A few prototypes could be made for publicity and evaluation. The R&D has to be subsidised or sponsored.

Half-car-man
Dhaka

Plea for help

Sir, We often come across news items in the press which say, for instance, that a poor father is appealing for help, for treatment of his child as he cannot afford the cost.

The cases are generally of surgery. This kind of patients often need treatments which are very expensive, and often require taking the patient out of the country. The reason being that sometimes the treatment required is not available in our own country. It would be a very good

idea if initiative is taken in the private sector, to set up such specialised hospitals as would be of help to people belonging to the limited income group. Each and every time, therefore, we do not have to depend upon treatment abroad.

Diseases are such a thing; we really do not know who will be afflicted by it.

It is not possible to take patients outside the country for every 'acute' but 'small' thing.

Therefore, we feel that such arrangements should be available in our country, to take care of people's needs, so that helpless fathers do not have to appeal for help.

Reaz Ahmed
Wart, Dhaka.