

Death on the Road

The country was shocked by the death of a young university student — knocked out of a rickshaw by a double-decker bus — only the other day. But all the show of public outcry became irrelevant last weekend with more deaths under reckless wheels. Public disgust with one single death came to naught because it was not strong enough to push officialdom into action. All the outraged statements to the press failed to protect a single life.

Consequently, the roads of Dhaka and highways of the rest of the country remain as dangerous as ever. There is, as yet, no public awareness campaign, either from the government or from any private agency. Television's effort in this regard is not really worth mentioning, since it is preaching mostly to the converted, and by concentrating mainly on cars in its "campaign" which does not have a voice-over, BTV is avoiding the real issue altogether. Even a casual observer of the scene would have little trouble in identifying trucks and buses, particularly mini-buses, as the real dangers.

There is a vicious logic working to make trucks and buses purveyors of high-speed death on the roads. Many if not most buses operate on a contract basis — that is, a fixed amount is given to the owner at the end of the day. The result is a mad rush to put in as many trips as possible, travelling at high speed through crowded streets and giving little thought to traffic rules (they do exist, believe it or not). Similarly, truck drivers and helpers also work under an incentive scheme — payment per trip. The onus is thus laid on speed.

The physical condition of the vehicles themselves contribute a great deal to the danger. Although rules and regulations exist on the roadworthiness of motorvehicles, it is quite apparent they are anything but enforced. A brake failing here, a steering wheel jamming there, and a life or two is lost forever. The owners do not pay a great deal of attention to the upkeep of their vehicles, because that would not contribute to their profit margins. But what excuse do the law-enforcing agencies have? None whatsoever, but still these vehicles are allowed to get away with murder, literally. The state of their engines can be seen and felt daily by the amount of black smoke they spew out, causing incalculable damage to the health of city-dwellers. Why these vehicles are allowed to continue to ply on the road despite endangering life and limb is beyond our comprehension.

The dangers posed by poorly-maintained and recklessly-driven trucks and buses, and official indifference to the problem, have now crossed the limit of tolerance. Laws of the land are being broken day and night, but only the innocent are paying for it — with their lives. There is no reason to believe why existing laws should not be able to deal with the problem, if enough pressure is brought on the police to enforce them.

But the situation may have reached a crisis point where more drastic action is required. A high-powered committee ought to be formed without delay to investigate into the state of the machines, the conditions under which they are operated, the age and experience of drivers of trucks and buses, condition of roads and highways themselves, existing traffic rules and regulations, and last but not least, the apparent lack of effectiveness of the police. The report and recommendations of the committee should be made public, and acted upon swiftly. Otherwise, continued anarchy on the roads will further erode public confidence on the institutions of the country and enhance feelings of insecurity.

Philippine Experience

Even by the Philippines standards, where politics follow an unpredictable course, there is no end to the guessing game as to what may happen next, within coming few weeks. Will Imelda Marcos return to Manila to face a trial for allegedly stealing millions of dollars from her country's treasury? Or will she offer to return a part of it — maybe a mere \$350 million which is said to be in Swiss bank accounts — to the government of Corazon Aquino and make a deal for the trouble-free rehabilitation of herself and her children in their home province of Ilocano?

It is the possible timing of the return of Mrs Marcos to the Philippines that adds a new element to the current guessing game. For the presidential election, due next year, the brisk campaign is already on. The Senate President Ramon Mitra, a veteran politician, is said to be a front-runner, whose credentials include a short prison term he had served under the late President Ferdinand Marcos. Mr. Mitra's strongest rival is likely to be General Fidel Ramos, a senior Minister in President Aquino's administration, who retains a fairly strong base in the armed forces and a stronger one among people who want to see the present administration replaced by a tougher one. But, then, is General Ramos whose handling of several abortive coups left many wondering about his decisiveness the man to run the show better than Cory Aquino? Finally, will President Aquino herself take the plunge and run again, what she keeps saying she won't do?

It seems that with all their good intentions, politicians in the Philippines, including President Aquino herself, continue to face enormous problems just in putting the country back on the right track. There are all kinds of reasons for what can only be described as a national decline. One reason is obvious. When a country potentially as resourceful as the Philippines has experienced a long period of authoritarian rule, the process of its recovery often turns out to be far more complicated and painful than just the overthrow of the dictatorship. For both Bangladesh and the Philippines, this may be a shared experience.

Arafat Interview Storm Reopens PLO Splits

Allan Thompson writes from Tunis

An interview with Yassar Arafat by a Canadian journalist has caused a stir within the Palestine Liberation Organisation. In the interview, which first appeared in the Toronto Star, Arafat said he would concede land from the Occupied Territories to be used as a UN zone between a future Palestinian state and Israel. The hardliners in the PLO reacted strongly and Arafat tried to back down.

Under the 1947 UN partition plan, the Palestinians would have received much more territory than they are now seeking. But they refused



the plan, hoping to keep all Palestine. The rest is history.

Within the PLO there was even debate over whether PLO-sponsored Palestinians should meet with US Secretary of State James Baker.

Palestinians who live in the territories are adding their voices to the struggle demanding better representation in the Palestinian National Council (PNC) and pushing for the creation of a Palestinian government in exile that would include members from the territories.

A leading Palestinian newspaper in the territories, Al Fajr (Dawn), recently started a section that will feature proposals from intellectuals and to discuss relations between Palestinians inside and outside the territories.

A top Palestinian journalist in the territories, Hanna Senjora, has said "some parts are trying to create a rift between inside and the outside. There are some efforts at the international, Arab and Israeli level to create this rift."

He suggested the election of an equal number of PNC members from the territories as a necessary step to "move the peace process ahead faster." Senjora said his proposals should help the PLO.

Certainly the United States would seem eager to play on any such rift by suggesting the Palestinians need not be represented by the PLO.

Working closely with Palestinians in the territories could well serve the purposes of the US. If the Americans feel it is in their interest to live up to their commitment to deal with the Palestinian problem, avoiding the PLO and dealing directly with the territories might be the quickest route.

Certainly the Israelis would be more disposed to talk with someone other than the PLO. And leaders in the territories could be more anxious to make a deal and free themselves from under the boot of military occupation.

And if they did manage to drive a wedge between Palestinians in the territories and those outside, the US could savour the sweet revenge of helping to grant Palestinian autonomy while at the same time keeping Arafat out in the cold, the ultimate punishment for his support of Iraq during the Gulf war.

For his part, Arafat did acknowledge that the US now has a key role to play in getting the Israelis to sit down at the table.

"Definitely, this is the challenge.... Definitely, they have the upper hand now and specially after the Gulf war."

And while making no apologies for his strong anti-coalition stance during the Gulf war, Arafat doggedly defended his leadership and the PLO's right to represent the Palestinian people.

"I am astonished. In this new order that America is offering to the world, do they want to appoint the leaders in this area? I have been elected by my people. We are proud of our democracy."

He again defended his actions during the Gulf crisis, which included such inflammatory remarks as the suggestion Palestinians would join Iraqis in the trenches.

When asked about such anti-coalition rhetoric, Arafat immediately produced a copy of the PLO peace plan issued on August 30, the first point of which called for the withdrawal of Iraq from Kuwait.

"You can read it," he said, putting the document on the table and jabbing his finger to paragraph one. "Withdrawal of the Iraqi presence from Kuwait," he said.

In the end, the wily and enigmatic Arafat remained defiant and scoffed at the flood of analysis from pundits and politicians alike saying he is finished, vanquished and that his actions have hurt the Palestinian cause.

But privately, other PLO moderates said he wished Arafat had put more emphasis on the PLO opposition to the military occupation of Kuwait.

And in Al Fajr, Radi Al-Jarai said steps had to be taken to get out of the post-war situation that dealt a blow to the PLO and weakened its international position.

Al-Jarai repeated the demand for greater territorial representation on the PNC so that in case of negotiations, the territories would be represented.

His proposal carried the implicit warning that otherwise, some people from the territories could undertake negotiations outside the PLO.

But for Arafat taking steps of any kind is not so easy when you have one bunch pulling you forward, and another pulling you back.

GEMINI NEWS

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Bhutan: The Last Shangri-La on Earth

by Tuhfa Zaman Ali

THE people of the land comprising what is known to us as Bhutan would like to call it by its original name *Druk Yul* or the land (*Yul*) of the Thunder-*Druk*. At the end of the 12th century, according to Bhutanese legend, as Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje was consecrating a new monastery in Namkhiphu in Central Tibet he heard the sound of thunder — popularly known to be the "voice of dragon". Taking this to be a good omen, he named the monastery *Druk*, the religious school founded by him came to be called *Drukpa* and when the *Drukpas* unified the land comprising present day Bhutan, they gave it the name *Druk-Yul*. In Buddhist mythology, the thunderbolt symbolizes "wisdom that is pure as diamond" and the dragon comes in as the "promulgator of absolute truth, resounding in thunder throughout the heavens for the whole world to hear and take heed". The land of the Thunder Dragon — what a poetic name for an enchantingly beautiful country!

But how did it get the name Bhutan? History is unclear as to the origin of the name, but the most plausible theory is that it is based on the Sanskrit phrase *Bhot ant*, or the region at the end (*ant*) of Tibet (*Bhot*), which really marks the geographical location of Bhutan. Indeed, though once greatly influenced by the Tibetan culture and religious practices, Bhutan is today a separate integrated whole, with its own identity, culture, traditions, its own distinctive *Tantric* form of Mahayana Buddhism, and a people with a unique sense of pride, in all that embodies the Bhutan of today.

The Thunder-Dragon of Bhutan does not spit fire; it is really a Peaceful Dragon and symbolizes the serenity that is Bhutan, the etiquette that its people demonstrate in every-

ral and the sacred. Bhutan has also been called the Dragon Kingdom or the Land of the Peaceful Dragon. Bhutanese folklore and mythology time and again refer

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day life, the traditional and religious values that they so cherish, the prayer flags that flutter in the cool breeze of the mountains and the *dzongs* (seat of state and religious power) that are outstanding architectural and spiritual evidence of their deep faith in the combination of the tempo-

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sweet corns and baked beans with *Druk* tomato sauce, spread *Druk* orange marmalade on our toasts, take *Druk* mixed pickles with our rice and quench our thirst with *Druk* lemon squash or *Druk* orange juice. *Druk*-Pipe is manufactured in Bhutan and *Yu-Druk* is a travel agency. *Druk* Express takes one by road from the mountains of Thimphu to the border town of Phuntsholing at the foothills of the Himalayas. There are *Druk* pharmacies, *Druk* enterprises and *Druk* guest-houses scattered across the country. And then there are the ruins of the once magnificent *Druk-Yel Dzong* (or fortress of the victorious *Drukpas*) that was built in the *Paro* Valley in 1647.

Bhutanese has made them a very independent people proud of their traditions and their land. The beauty of the Dragon Kingdom lies in its culture, its religion, its traditions, its people and the magnificence of its land. Bhutan is undoubtedly one of the most picturesque lands on Earth, with its mountainous terrain, its snow-capped mountains and the ravines that flow through the valleys. The Land of the Thunder Dragon is fondly called The Last Shangri-La by its admirers.

In all its splendour, the Thunder-Dragon reigns over Bhutan. The rich cultural and religious heritage of the

Ms Ali is a freelance writer and a scholar on South Asian and Middle East affairs. The article is published on the occasion of the visit here of the Foreign Minister of Bhutan, Lyonpo Dawa Tsering. Arriving in Dhaka today, he will be leaving on a Southeast tour on Saturday.

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.

Kuwait and expatriates

Sir, There have been newsreports that Kuwait plans to regulate its expatriate manpower so that the country's total population remains at about one million. This is quite understandable. Kuwait has to pass through a phase of reconstruction after the ordeal of massive destruction by the Iraqi aggressors. For a year or so Kuwait will probably have no oil income because of the invaders' callous torching of its oil wells. So Kuwait cannot afford to accommodate unnecessary foreign population now.

Moreover, it is a fact that Kuwait's expatriate population even before the Iraqi invasion contained a large proportion of dispensable people. One of the main reasons for this was that most expatriates brought their families also. Thus while Kuwait got the benefit of the skill and expertise of one person, its civic facilities were burdened by four or five or more per-

sons. This will not be practical in the new circumstances now.

So now, as a general policy, expatriates without family or dependants should be taken for employment in Kuwait. In fact, before also only persons with a specified salary level were legally entitled to family visa for their dependants. But in practice this was not strictly implemented. Many expatriates of low income category and with no high qualifications managed to obtain family visa somehow. The result was the influx of unnecessary people.

In the changed conditions Kuwait need not take extra and unwanted load on its facilities like water supply, electricity, medical service, food provisions, etc. So I propose that normally single men should be taken for jobs in Kuwait. Even in the case of persons entitled to family visa by virtue of their salary, only husband or wife should be allowed to accompany the actual employee, not a team of children or other rela-

tions. I hope this suggestion will appeal to the Kuwaiti authorities. Dr. Azim, Dhaka.

Music and sargam

Sir, "Music is the highest pleasure," said an English critic. Probably, that is why it began to give me an inspiration to do something for getting such pleasure. But I could never give pleasure to anyone by practice of music. However, I decided to practise it only to be frustrated after more than a couple of years.

I was extremely serious in practising 'sargam' on the harmonium to clear my tone. I knew very few who toiled so hard for a thing. When I learnt that I was up and doing on the reed to lose something, the frustration came. And slowly, I began to give up the practice. Why?

The reason was that the 'sargam' method widely adopted all over the sub-continent includes no syllable of note representing vowel 'o'. As a result, one of the most important vocal notes or sounds is left out of practice. Nevertheless, I moved heaven and earth to recover by practising it to the note even without the harmonium. But alas! I got no recognition of my effort

in this widespread 'sargam' system practised or done as 'tan' in classical form by almost all learners, singers, and 'ustads' (experts). So I stopped utterly disappointed.

A lover of music, I could not keep peace very long. I sought to sing with the youngsters under the guidance of Rev. Fr. James T. Banas of Notre Dame College. To one's wonder, I got what I wanted. It is sol-fa, a system of syllables, sung to the notes of scale, and is a complete method for musical practice. I went on with it for several years. My experience of practising 'sare-ga-ma-pa-dha-ni-sa' and 'a-a-a-a-a-a-a' got its completeness in sol-fa system as vowel 'o' sound is represented 'trice' in the notes of scale, which gives a comprehensive practice to our musical tone. Thus 'o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o' comes into practice for clearing our tone as other vowels of notes.

Now an earnest request may be made to the musicians in general to find out some ways for the completeness of vocal practice so that like me boys and girls, singers and 'ustads' and all others may get the practical pleasure of the sweetness of the syllable representing the sound of vowel 'o' sung to the note

in the sol-fa system.

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Wedding age

Sir, Wedding age in Bangladesh is up, according to a recent NIPORT survey—good news indeed for an LDC with shrinking bearing capacity. Burdened with a population of 110 million in a land area of 55,126 sq. miles, Bangladesh has been experiencing one of the highest population growths in the world. This alarming natural population growth is attributed, among others, to the early marriage which is many times more in the rural than in urban areas.

Based on a sample 11,906 ever married women under 50 years age, the findings of the study indicate encouraging characteristics of the country's population today. The fact that the wedding age has risen by 2 years over the last decade, while the fertility rate has gone down from 7.5 to 4.9 owing to increased practice of contraceptives as effective birth control measures, is a considerable success of Family Planning sector.

The positive changes achieved lately in the demographic features of Bangladesh provide impetus to population control programmes. In order for the population size to be under control, a state supervised mandatory family planning programme may be more rewarding for the national target National appreciation for "no child" and probable penalty for more than one child will help slow down the natural growth rate. Delayed marriage and 'single' status should be encouraged, without disregarding the Universal Human Rights, especially for the national wellbeing.

Toward the ultimate target—zero population growth (ZPG)—in the next decade to become a self-reliant nation by 2000 A.D. will need intensive family planning education and effective birth control facilities.

Besides, that the first priority in the national advancement schemes is essentially a productively manageable populace should be the base for all sectorwise development plans for LDC Bangladesh.

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