

Dhaka, Wednesday, April 24, 1991

Warning from Dhamrai

Monday's tragic road accident on the Dhaka-Aricha highway brings another reminder of the horrifying dangers lurking in every corner of our public life. The tragedy also raises some disturbing questions on the state of our highways as well as the way public transport is regulated—or not, as the Dhamrai disaster surely demonstrated.

There is ample reason to believe that the condition of the bridge itself was not what it should have been to ensure safety. Many of our bridges are in an equally dangerous condition, with buses and trucks going over them risking precious lives every time.

But who is going to control the buses? Is there no law to prevent 52-seater buses from carrying 200 passengers, like the ill-fated one did on Monday? Like they do every single day? It seems the bus operators have gone totally out of the law's control as well as completely out of their minds. With an air of fatalism, the public looks resigned to its fate because there simply aren't enough public transports available compared to the number of passengers. For its part, the police appear unable or unwilling to impose any sort of discipline at bus terminals around the country.

There still remains the question of the drivers' age and experience. One striking feature on highways is the young age of the drivers, who tend to drive with a devil-may-care attitude, because all they want to do is to get from A to B as quickly as possible and with as many passengers as possible. In this business, time is indeed money, and safety of lives becomes a secondary consideration. The travelling public goes along with it because it has no choice and no voice either.

Now, we can expect an enquiry to be held into the Dhamrai accident. But will the public get to know the result of the investigation? Does the public ever get to know the results of such enquiries? Rarely, if at all. But that must now change. Report of the enquiry commission must be made public as soon as it is completed because people have a right to know. We cannot accept any more whitewashes or avoidance of responsibility. With full knowledge of the report, it would be possible to apply pressure to implement its recommendations.

Just as important is the issue of liability, not only in the case of the Dhamrai accident, but for all accidents in future. If the enquiry finds the state of the bridge to have been the cause of the crash, then the government should immediately, without any bureaucratic hassle, compensate the victims generously. On the other hand, if the condition of the vehicle itself or the driver is found to be the guilty party, then the owners of the bus should be held liable and compelled to compensate relatives of the dead and injured. If necessary, the government should take out court injunctions, seize their property, whatever, but make the bus operators wake up to their folly.

We also need to know what procedures the government has in maintaining roads and highways: how maintenance contracts are dished out and how frequently, if at all, road conditions are monitored. If regular monitoring is done, then why are roads in such a bad shape? And if no monitoring is done, why not? One thing we should keep in mind is that as long as our highways remain in the state they are, and over-loaded, ill-maintained buses driven by young men continue to use them, then another Dhamrai is just around the corner. To prevent that, the enquiry commission's recommendations should cover the widest possible area, from proper maintenance of roads and highways to increasing the number of buses in both the public and private sectors, to an effective system of supervision. Only then can the prevailing sense of helplessness and fatalism among the public be broken.

Money Sprouting Branches

In the first euphoric days after our victory in the Liberation War expectations went on a wild run. But with that some very fetching ideas on how to overcome poverty and backwardness were also being mined by a number of capable men. One idea related to getting down the silk fabrics that were hanging from the trees all over Bangladesh. No 'Kalpataru' or wish-tree was being alluded to. The whole of Bangladesh is literally filled with *bharenda* (castor) and *madar* trees. These provide, like mulberry, ideal food for silkworms. And silkworm eggs can be had by the lakhs almost for the asking. From these eggs to worms feeding fat on the leaves of those trees to the worms spinning a cocoon of silk thread is a matter that doesn't take either time or expertise. Or even forbidding investment. Silk grows out these trees indeed—one has only to do so much as taking it off the trees.

Bangladesh, however, is a strange land—as strange as Alexander observed India to be in a celebrated passage of a D. L. Roy play. Little came of that idea, even less came off the trees.

Yesterday a news story from Kurigram played on a similar 'Midas touch' thing. This time it is the *shimul*—the source of all the kapok in the world. One sizeable *shimul* tree, according to the report, yields kapok or the so-called 'shimul-tula' worth Tk. 10,000 every year. And kapok is in perpetually good demand for use in specially the pillow. There is no substitute for kapok specially in the flood-prone areas. A kapok pillow doesn't take water and sink.

The news story complains that because of lack of proper care of the *shimul* trees, the kapok production has gone down dangerously in the whole of the greater Rangpur area. That is an alarming news for in the other parts of Bangladesh *shimul* has a great enemy in the axemen sent down by the match-factory wallahs—and production of kapok keeps on dwindling there too.

If silk sarees were hanging from *bharenda* trees, it is cash money that sprouts on the branches of the *shimul*. Bengalees are the only people so disinterested in money, it seems. Other explanations as to why these tree-based projections do not click do not stick together. The news story wistfully remarks that a well-kept *shimul* could help a family—all of our village families—greatly. In fact, there was a plethora of nature things that could help the family finances equally or more.

How much poverty and deprivation will be needed to good people to get nature to help them—even by way of the family budget? One has the creeping fear that perhaps we are already past that stage—and well into an incapacity to seeing light at the end.

ADB OPENS ITS ANNUAL MEETING TODAY

Bank Looks for More Relevance for Asia

Special to The Star

In Vancouver, Canada, gathering for its three-day annual meeting starting today, the Asian Development Bank will be battling again with its once-in-four-years exercise of replenishing its concessional lending window—the Asian Development Fund (ADF).

This round of the exercise is known as ADF VI, and preliminary discussions have hovered around the figure of US\$10 billion. That's what the management of the Manila-based regional development bank believes its poorer Asia-Pacific member countries will need in soft resources over the next four years. The figure takes into account the soft-loan desires of the two first-time claimants, India and China. Both are technically qualified to receive soft loans, on a per capita income basis, and their needs, potentially, could be enormous.

Western donor countries, particularly the United States, are uneasy that India and China could muscle out the traditional soft-loan borrowers, like Bangladesh, and do not relish the prospect since the two could easily have access other sources, including commercial.

Suffering from its own budgetary problems, the United States has let it be known it would be happy with a US\$6 billion ADF VI (against US\$3.6 billion ADF V). As always in the past, a compromise will be reached, may be around the US\$7-8 billion level, and everybody will go home happy.

Ironically, the debate has little relevance for surprisingly large number of Asia-Pacific countries, whose needs for soft loans should count among the acutest. For one reason or another, these countries have virtually fallen out of ADB's lending programme.

The last loan for Afghanistan was approved in April 1979. Myanmar (Burma) hasn't received anything in the past five years. The pipeline for Vietnam was shut off in

1975, the year of the American debacle. Cambodia remains frozen in time since 1970. Laos hasn't received more than two loans in any given year, with long breaks in between. Loans to Maldives, Bhutan, and the ten island nations in the Pacific (Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Vanuatu, and Western Samoa) aren't big enough to count as anything better than a lending ritual. Mongolia, the latest member, has yet to open its wicket, and when it does it is unlikely to be hitting over-boundaries. And yet, these 18 countries constitute 56 per cent of ADB's 32-strong membership in developing Asia.

Last year, when ADB approved US\$3.9 billion in new loans, this group of countries accounted for no more than US\$67.5 million. In the Bank's 24-year total of US\$32.6 billion, no more than US\$1.6 billion was the group's share.

Four other countries have graduated out of ADB's lending programme altogether: South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Two others, Thailand and Malaysia, have

countries. These are the countries that receive most loans, most attention, and most staff visits. They have track record in borrowing, and ADB, like other multilateral institutions, likes nothing better than traversing the beaten track.

It was the same story in 1989. In 1988, and all the way back to 1967, when ADB began to lend to its members. Of the 24-year total of loans, 75% went to the Group of Eight.

OPEN EYE : BY VEDETTE

For ADB, it makes a convenient little world, easy to track, easy to service, easy to monitor, easy to visit, easy to mollycoddle. But it is not a balanced one. Nor fair. And, as ADB presses its donors for billions of dollars in soft-loan replenishment, questions will be asked.

Of course, the problem is not of ADB's own making, and its management has an argument which is valid as far as it goes: it can't control a coun-

try which claims as its goal the economic development of the entire region, not just a part of it, however important.

True, the eight mainstream countries happen to constitute the largest chunk of Asia. They are the ones with good borrowing track records. But that's not the point. The question is, is ADB doing enough to make sure its activities are spread meaningfully over the entire re-

gion? War or political instability may have affected ADB in Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Vietnam, but how about the other countries that are smaller and weaker? It is not fair to give up on such countries by simply pointing to

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their lack of absorptive capacity. They may not be in a position to absorb projects now, but they certainly would like to develop an economy that could absorb them in the future. Are they being told or shown how they can improve their economic management, how they should approach economic growth, how they can come on to the economic mainstream?

One has yet to come across concrete evidence from ADB that that's what the case is. Projects or ideas, ADB seems to have little to offer its smaller members.

ADB hides behind the excuse that it cannot dictate to its member countries (although it succumbs easily to their political wishes). Economic reform, it argues, is

big enough to support new projects every year, get very little, that too in dribs.

As it is, ADB does not seem to know what to do with the smaller Asia-Pacific economies.

They exist on the periphery of ADB's activities, as they do on the periphery of Asia's prosperity.

Smaller countries with smaller populations have done well in other parts of the world. There is no reason why such successes could not be replicated in Asia. If small is beautiful in terms of alternative technology, small can be beautiful in terms of economic growth as well. But someone has to show the proper way. That, one imagines, should have been ADB's appropriate role.

How, then, is one to judge ADB's performance and its *raison d'être*? In its 24 years up to the end of 1990, it lent to 964 projects in developing member countries, which, no doubt, has created jobs, built power stations, laid out highways. But Asia has not come to where it is because of ADB. That's the fact. ADB hasn't made South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore the NIEs (newly industrializing economies) they are today, or will not make Malaysia and Thailand the NIEs they could become tomorrow. As economies, India and China are so big and complex that, even though ADB were to increase its lending to these countries, its impress will not be noticed. And the countries where its impact could be most felt—the smaller Asia-Pacific economies—are doomed to contend with their economic backwardness simply because they cannot come up with a steady stream of projects year after year.

There is little merit in giving loans to the creditworthy. It's easily done. The glory lies in trying and pulling weaker nations out of their economic rut.

Unfortunately, ADB is not philosophically inclined to change its project-oriented course, even though, for many countries, such a course is no longer relevant. The Bank seems happy with the way things are. Loan volumes continue to grow—something to boast about at annual meetings—as does profits. In 1990, ADB netted a clean US\$509 million, higher than even Hong Kong Bank's net profit for the same year. So, why shouldn't this international organisation be pleased about it?

The writer has worked in a number of international organisations for past two decades, specializing in aid programmes for Asian countries. He will be contributing to The Daily Star from time to time.

USSR-Japan Relations : Chances for a Breakthrough Remain

by Vyacheslav Kostikov

Political Analyst

tangible territorial concessions.

Touching upon possibilities for major advances in Soviet-Japanese relationship, former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze noted that the state of bilateral affairs directly depends on the internal political situation in the

man and a politician. The late British Premier said that the former thinks of the future while the latter of the coming elections. The Soviet President can, without doubt, be called a

discredit for many years to come. The Tokyo talks show that, despite all home problems and dangers, Gorbachev views his presidency in the long-term prospect.

Political prejudice between the two sides cannot be abolished overnight after the first-ever visit of a Soviet head of state to Japan.... In Tokyo Gorbachev voiced its (USSR's) intention to end the historical deadlock in Soviet-Japanese relations. Time will tell how rapidly this process is going to gather momentum.

USSR-Diplomatic breakthrough in Tokyo at the expense of even minor sacrifices would have thus been fraught with serious troubles for Gorbachev. One should not focus on temporary difficulties or extremes of Soviet policy to grasp the motives of Gorbachev's visit and see his strategy in the context of the new political thinking pioneered by the Soviet President.

In his speech in the Japanese parliament Gorbachev recalled how Winston Churchill qualified a states-

real statesman. It would have suited Gorbachev more to "bang on the table" and return home "with flying colours" in the light of momentary advantages and with due regard to the current alignment of forces in the USSR. It was in this way that Nikita Khrushchev behaved years ago when he displayed his shoes in the United Nations. Gorbachev did nothing of the kind though Japan's tough stand gave him emotional grounds for this.

A broad-minded statesman, Gorbachev does not yield to transient temptations to avoid

Gorbachev failed to launch major shifts in Soviet-Japanese relations. But he made it clear that not everything is lost. The Soviet President invited the Japanese Premier to visit Moscow as early as August of this year. He hinted that the Tokyo round is not completed but has only been adjourned for a few months.

Important events may happen over this period. Gorbachev hopes, for example, to push through the national parliament the union treaty to resolve all domestic political and territorial differences. The

of the Soviet Far East and Siberia. There are grounds to presume that Japanese business circles mistrust of things Soviets may start thawing.

The 20th century has seen misunderstanding and animosity in Soviet-Japanese relationship. In 1904 the Russo-Japanese war was crowned with a military and political humiliation of Russia. In 1945 Japan suffered similar feelings. Quite a few emotions alongside political antagonisms were implicated in those conflicts.

Political prejudice between the two sides cannot be abolished.

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.

A Tribute

Sir, On the night of Shab-e-Qadr, I prayed for the divine guidance of all those who have been chosen to participate in the nation-building task for sometime.

In the process, a tribute to the Acting President is due. We are not accustomed to silent workers, selfless and dedicated, who do their job quietly, and noiselessly slink away. We have been brought up on leaders driven by ego, and high-profile propaganda, who thrived on noise.

They are succeeded by generations of noise-makers, who come and go, leaving a lot of noise behind. We have forgotten the virtues of quietness and humility. We need a lot of attention and publicity to satisfy our ego.

Our Acting President displayed considerable moral courage in accepting a sensitive, thankless, but

noble job. At times, his patience was stretched to the limit, but under all circumstances he acted as a true gentleman. Devoid of ambition (and therefore desires and wants), he was self-sufficient unto his selflessness.

May God increase his blessings upon you!

A. M.
Dhaka.

Cologne Fair

Sir, Right thing at right place at right time at right price is the key to the right trade. Participating in Cologne Fair regularly is a right step in the right direction for Bangladesh.

Cologne Fair is regarded as one of the best and biggest international trade fairs—popularly known as Number One in the world—and is participated by 28000 exhibitors from 100 countries with over 20 departments and about 2 million visitors and buyers

from more than 150 countries.

A dozen Bangladeshi firms attend this fair regularly. This fair is a grand opportunity for Bangladesh to purchase foreign commodities for her essential needs including manufacturing equipment, spare parts, production materials, etc. and, at the same time, to explore potential markets for all domestic products inspite of keen competitions on quality.

Keeping foreign exchange in view, efforts to find customers for domestic surplus commodities as well as for made-to-order goods will be worthwhile, be it foods, garments, cosmetics, medicines, decorative, educational materials, or anything else.

Frequency of Bangladesh's participations in international fairs like Cologne Fair should be increased, while organizing similar national and international fairs at home often will expand the horizon of potential markets for Bangladeshi products.

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Smile, liked or disliked?

Sir, Comparing a person with a thing or a being with the use of simile, similitude or metaphor may very much be honourable as well as dishonourable to him. To call a person a flower is good, while to call one a tiger is no good. But when a father calls his son a bird, it may be a matter of affection or even of dislike.

Now if somebody calls a big man a tiger, a lion or a giant in a bid to raise his honour in the eye of the people, he is sure to make a mistake in so doing. Even an ordinary man may think it beneath his dignity to be called or named after a lion because he is a man above all lower creatures, and because man is the best of all creation what to speak of a lion.

Could we then revise any title instantly given to a big man?

John Paul Baird
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Pure drinking water

Sir, These days we all are aware of the dangers of drinking impure water, or in

other words water which has not been boiled and cooled before drinking. Nowadays, this idea is being made popular among the people, that drinking of water not boiled can be as serious as walking into a tiger's den.

Diarrhoea, dysentery and other such diseases are the direct result of drinking impure water. We should remember, that these two diseases are not only danger signals for children but also for the adults.

However, it is with great regret I mention that, most offices situated in Motijheel Area, the posh commercial district of the metropolis, do not have any arrangement for purified drinking water. Thus except very few, most office goers are doing with tap water. This is very strange, because actually speaking pure drinking water does not cost much, and such offices do spend a good amount on many things not as much important as pure drinking water.

I am sure with a little effort and care we can arrange for this