

Dhaka, Wednesday, May 8, 1991

## Probing a Disaster

The Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, the Acting President Justice Shahabuddin, has set up a court of inquiry to probe into the causes as to why so many of our aircraft, helicopters and a few naval vessels were lost or severely damaged during the last cyclone. The four-member court of inquiry will be headed by a Major General from the Army and three senior officials from the three services. The court will submit its report within three days.

This newspaper welcomes this decision of the Supreme Commander. We think such an inquiry will clear the air about some questions that have been agitating the public mind ever since the incident occurred. We are sure that the court of inquiry will uncover all the necessary facts relating to this tragedy, place the blame where it belongs and bring the wrong doers to book.

It needs to be pointed out that it is after a long time that the people, who are the real guarantors of sovereignty of a nation, will have some access to information regarding an affair which, in the previous times, would have been kept hidden from the public view under the excuse of national security. We would like to congratulate the Supreme Commander, the Prime Minister and her government and the Armed Forces hierarchy for collectively working to uphold the principle of the public's right to know and scrutinise every aspect of national affairs. We congratulate them further for creating a precedence which, in time, will hopefully become a tradition that will not only strengthen democratic institutions but also greatly increase public's faith in institutions that they help to build and sustain.

We are aware that there are defence secrets whose public discussion may jeopardize our national security. However, we sincerely believe that it will serve the larger national interest and the cause of open society if issues which do not relate to considerations of our national security, which may well be discussed in the report, are not kept away from public knowledge. In this regard we look forward to knowing about the findings of the court of inquiry.

## Stemming the Rot

A newspaper headline yesterday declared: Floating population rises in Jamalpur. The town has for years been an originating point for a substantial floating population influx to the national capital. Now it is going to feel the crunch itself.

There has been other perennial points from where men and women together with a profusion of children, travel to Dhaka in unending processions. They come from Faridpur, Barisal, Rangpur. The ever-growing floating population in the capital is a national problem. It is a national tragedy an answer to which is as yet unknown to the nation — if only because the nation has not so far applied itself to find one.

The unceasing influx is all a result of river erosion. Failure to heal the problem can be blamed on very bad river management. But managing rivers in a deltaic region, or where the rivers flow into the seas, is too much of a tall order for an economically as well as technologywise puny country like Bangladesh. Bangladesh's one point of discomfiture for the past century has been the fact that its rivers are not as small as it is, and that these between them discharge the highest volume of sweet water to the world ocean. To look for an antidote to river erosion and as such to spurts in floating population is plainly unpaying.

But the rivers do not erode only. In Bangladesh rivers keep on a dangerous slimming course for quite some time — yielding more land than devouring. If Jamuna, the new Brahmaputra that is, is eating up some of its shores and evicting thousands every year from their homes and hearths, what happens to the miles and miles of land it disgorge out of its bowels every year. Granted, the newly risen tract is not readily usable land. But what happened to the land that was gifted in the yesteryears by the rivers Brahmaputra, Ganga and Padma?

What has happened to the centuries-old practice, celebrated by the Persian terms *Shikasti* and *Payosti*, which used to govern the land-tenure problems caused by river erosion and movement? This pauperisation-and-urban influx syndrome owes its 'sociophase' killing power directly to bad social management rather than the farfetched absence of apt river management. Bad social management should primarily mean bad governance and crumbling social moves where people charged with ensuring just administration fail to administer as well as to be just.

The city slums that grow out these erosion people are but a tip of an iceberg-sized national malaise. Serious efforts should soon be made to stem the rot where it begins the chain — on the river-front and the district headquarters.

# Human Rights Cases Decline in the Philippines

Manolo B. Jara writes from Manila

**Protecting the human rights of all Filipinos has been one of the hallmarks of the Aquino government for the past five years**

HERE appears to be a decreasing trend in the number of human rights violations in the country, particularly those committed allegedly by soldiers and policemen.

People are increasingly becoming more aware of their civil and political rights, says the Commission on Human Rights (CHR).

And such awareness, it adds, is being translated into complaints filed with the commission not only against soldiers and policemen but also against Communist insurgents and other rebel groups.

But what is deemed more significant is the decrease in the number of complaints received by the Commission. In 1990, it reports, it received a total of 979 cases against the 1,504 in 1989.

Of last year's total, the bulk, or 772 cases, were filed against soldiers and police-

men. Nevertheless, the figure represented a 27.2 per cent decrease from the 1,061 similar cases filed in 1989, the Commission says.

Despite this, however, a commission official admits: "There's still a long way to go before human rights violations can be fully minimized. But a step has been made and we are making significant progress although slowly."

Protection of human rights has become one of the hallmarks of the government of President Aquino since she came into power five years ago.

This she did when Mrs. Aquino established the Commission on Human Rights shortly after she became

President in 1986.

The Commission is mandated to investigate on its own or on complaint by any party all forms of human rights violations as well as provide appropriate legal measures for the protection of such rights of all Filipinos.

As part of that mandate, the Commission reports that it resolved last year a total of 1,620 cases. Of the total, 522 were found to be human rights violations and corresponding charges were filed in court or other appropriate agencies.

A breakdown of the charges filed by the Commission apparently disputes harsh criticisms that nothing is being done against men in uniform

who violate human rights.

The Commission says: of the 522 human rights violation cases, 174, were filed with the military's Judge Advocate General's office (JAGO); 84 in civil courts; 49 with the National Police Commission (NAPOLCOM); 48 with the Prosecutor's office; 11 simultaneously with JAGO and NAPOLCOM; and the rest with such other agencies as the Board of Pardon and Parole and the Education Department.

Also last year, another major step was taken toward implementing the Commission's mandate of protecting human rights. This was the release of guidelines in the conduct of

arrest, searches and saturation drives as well as the establishment of checkpoints.

Signed last September, the agreement was forged by the Commission with the Departments of Justice and National Defence and the Philippine Constabulary-Integrated National Police (now the Philippine National Police).

According to the Commission, the agreement was in compliance with a Supreme Court decision on the need to draw up and enforce "clear" guidelines regarding raids and similar activities. Among the salient points:

In all instances, police or

military saturation drives shall be led by a "responsible and accountable" officer and must be accompanied by any elected district officials.

The names of the persons arrested and that of the arresting officer, as well as the reason for the arrest, must be entered in the district docket.

Saturation campaigns must be conducted only in areas identified as hideouts of criminals or subversive elements, prostitution dens and similar lairs of illegal activities like gambling or prohibited drugs.

Law enforcers must observe "maximum tolerance" during rallies, strikes and demonstrations. In making arrests and searches during these instances, law enforcers should be in uniform with their ID cards and nametags on.

— DEPTNEWS ASIA

# Cameroon Explodes with Impatience for Change

by Jonathan Derrick

**Cameroon's single-party government has agreed to eventual multi-party changes. But they can't come soon enough for people seeking new freedoms. They have taken to the streets to protest at delays and are dying at the hands of police who have not relinquished their tight control over the population.**

CAMEROON'S President, Paul Bitya, is coming under serious challenge after agreeing to end 25 years of one-party rule.

In April, several people died in demonstrations in the capital Yaounde, and several other cities.

The cause was not so much a demand for a multi-party democracy but for more rapid moves towards one. President Bitya had already agreed to a multi-party system.

As a result of popular pressure, elections have been brought forward and are now scheduled to be held later this year. They will be contested by 11 new parties as well as the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM).

But this has not satisfied a people tired of authoritarian rule.

Cameroon is made up of the former British Cameroons (two provinces) and the French Cameroons (eight provinces). It is officially bilingual but is predominantly "Francophone". The country has been less affected than others by Africa's economic crisis, though that is now getting worse.

It seemed peaceful and docile under the one-party regimes headed by President Ahmadou Ahidjo from independence in 1960 until his resignation in 1982, then by Bitya. But the docility has been on the surface only.

Before independence, Cameroonians enjoyed free party politics and a free press in both former British and French zones. A well-educated and politically alert people, they did not accept one-party rule willingly. The "Anglophones" may have been particularly disgruntled, since they have suffered discrimination as well, but the others, too, were given no choice about submission to a single party.

With one-party rule went

censorship and police control over the population, with identity cards, road checks, a powerful gendarmerie, a powerful but public National Security agency, and a number

of secret police forces with secret cells and torture.

This system changed a little when Bitya replaced Ahidjo — people spoke more freely

then, at least, but the repressive system remained intact.

It is because President Bitya and his colleagues still want to retain most of this control that many Cameroonians are not satisfied with concessions made since the calls for democracy became irresistible last year.

In May 1990 a new party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), organised a rally in Bamenda, capital of North-West Province, which led to police shooting in which six died.

This led to more insistent calls for a change to a multi-party system, for example by the bishops of the Catholic Church. Later that year a new law authorised creation of new parties on certain conditions. But the public response seems to be "thank you for nothing". The government has given in to popular demand with obvious reluctance and people see that it will give nothing unless pushed.

As an example of government policy, a new press law passed in December 1990 retains censorship and media restrictions. There is in fact more freedom of comment and reporting than before, but two prominent journalists were sentenced to suspended jail terms in January; this led to widespread demonstrations in Douala, the biggest city.

The gendarmes and other police have not altered their domineering and violent behaviour which Cameroonians have known for three decades.

The secret police are still there.

The government wants change on its own terms and under its total control.

It is in opposition to this that the call has gone out for a national conference. Protesters, including students at Yaounde University, and personalities including Cardinal Tumi, Catholic archbishop of Garoua, want a conference of political and other groups, including the CPDM, but not under its control, free to discuss any changes.

Such conference have heralded the transition to multi-party democracy in several ex-French African states, such as Benin and the Congo. President Bitya has consistently opposed it.

Not only is the demand for a national conference rejected, but the police have been turned loose on demonstrators calling for it. This is ironic in view of the concessions already made. But the President says it is because political parties now operate freely that a conference is not needed.

Those not satisfied with that argument, especially students, began demonstrations from early April in Yaounde and Douala.

Demonstrators called for a national conference and the release of all political prisoners. There were clashes in Yaounde on April 3 and more

student demonstrations there on April 8. On April 11 the President announced that elections would be brought forward. But opposition continued and repression grew uglier.

From April 12 to 16 there were disturbances in Bafoussam, Kumbo, Doua and several other towns. Police violence in the capital and other places was reported to be far worse than officially admitted, with the press apparently less free than had been thought.

Rumours spoke of 30 killed by police in Yaounde, 33 in Bafoussam, and 29 in Ngoundere on 20 April. On April 18-19 there were strikes in several places and police moved on to the Yaounde University campus. Students alleged that several were killed and others assaulted.

Cameroon's rumour machine (called "pavement radio") has always been active and only partly reliable: some of the reports of numbers killed may be too high, but 20 deaths have been officially admitted.

Almost anything could happen now. The government will have to decide whether to impose tighter control or whether to let the limited freedoms already granted remain and develop after a general amnesty voted by the National Assembly.

Repression will probably not stifle opposition for long. A regime which has shown great skill in keeping power seems to have lost the knack in the changed conditions of Africa. — GEMINI NEWS

JONATHAN DERRICK is a London-based writer on African affairs.



## 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.

### University Act, 1973

Sir, University Act, 1973 has seriously limited the legitimate right of the government to exercise its control over the affairs of the Universities. The post of the Vice Chancellor seems to have turned into a political one instead of academic and administrative. One example is the recent happenings at Chittagong University. The V.C. of Chittagong University appears to have been working more like a politician taking side with a political student group, even making provocative political speech against another group of students. This has contributed to the unhappy situation on the campus.

But, assumably, in spite of the government's sincere will to intervene in the affairs of the varsity, the University Act, 1973 has been a bottleneck in this regard.

I would like to suggest execution of appropriate amendments in the University Act, 1973 in order to restore the right of the government to exercise its legitimate control over the affairs of University, including appointment and removal of the VC. Otherwise anarchy and indiscipline may continue to prevail on the campus which can be disastrous for the nation.

M.N. Uddin  
East Nasirabad, Chittagong.

### Archaeological excavations

Sir, Antiquities valued at crores of Taka found through archaeological excavation from renowned archaeological sites and places of the country during the last half a century are reportedly either missing or lost and actual number of antiques are supposedly not available in the record of the concerned department as pointed out by a relevant confidential source.

During the past rule of Britain and Pakistan valuable antiquities of our civilisation were smuggled out of the country on different excuses. It is reported that some bronze antiquities and copper plates were carried out to Pakistan in 1967-68 in the name of chemical preservation by the then Superintendent of Archaeology.

Many of the antiquities excavated during the last 20 years are assumed to be smuggled out of the country in the same or other way.

After Bangladesh came into being in 1971, excavations have been carried out at sixteen different archaeological sites during the last 20 years. These places are Mahasthangarh of Bogra, Sitakot Bihar of Dinajpur, Bashu Bihar of

Bogra, Bihar Dhap of Bogra, Mongolkot of Bogra, Aaurun Dhap of Dinajpur, Halud Bihar of Naogaon, Gaur Darashbari of Naogaon, Ananda Bihar of Comilla, Rupban Mura of Comilla, Itakhola Mura of Comilla, Mainamati Dhubi-2 of Comilla, Bharat Baina of Jessore, Lalbagh Fort of Dhaka, and Savar of Dhaka.

The actual number of antiquities found from the excavations of the above mentioned places are not reportedly found in the record of the Department of Archaeology and no projection of those antiquities have been made so far, as said in the published report of the department. It is assumed that the antiquities found from the archaeological sites have been either sent abroad on this or that excuse or even smuggled out of the country, says an expert observer.

To cite as an example: What are the antiquities — which had been found from the excavation of Mahasthangarh in 1988, and where these have been exhibited? The site has been dated to a time before Christ and primary Muslim period, but the antiquities on the basis of which this prediction and remarks have been made by the archaeological experts are also not available in the record of the concerned department.

Another example may be cited as that in 1971, during the liberation war, 24 bronze objects valued at Taka 50 lakh were reportedly stolen from the Mainamati Museum but no official diary was found to be recorded. Besides, 93

bronze images valued at Taka two crore were stolen from the same museum on 24th October, 1982 vide diary No 50 dated 26.10.82 of Kotwali police station, Comilla.

Hence, the very purpose of archaeological excavation has been defeated, while nothing but complaints against thefts and smuggling of antiquities are often obtained. And these national issues remain unresolved, sometimes also allegedly ignored by the concerned Dept of Archaeology.

Mrs Mahfuza Jahan  
Dhaka

### In aid of victims

Sir, A strong cyclonic storm accompanied by a huge tidal surge which hit the country's coastal districts in the early hours of Tuesday (April 30, 1991) has killed tens of thousands of people and rendered lakhs homeless. Property damaged by the devastating cyclone is incredible. The Prime Minister has already appealed to the international community to come forward in aid of the humanity in distress in Bangladesh.

We sincerely hope that our friendly countries and communities will extend their all round support to help us in overcoming sufferings of our people and in re-constructing the destroyed infrastructure while we must engage our all-out effort in that.

M. Zahidul Haque  
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## OPINION

### CU should Reopen Now

It is quite unfortunate as well as a matter of grim concern that the University of Chittagong is still closed causing incalculable loss to the young learners and their guardians.

Following a violent clash between the activists of Islamic Chhatra Shibir and supporters of APSU, the university was closed sine die on December 22. After a lapse of over four months, it, however, reopened on April 23 amid light security measures but was again closed, dramatically, hours after receiving an order from the Ministry of Education, perhaps apprehending more violence on the campus.

The situation turned worse harbouring the issue of removal of the Vice Chancellor, Alamgir Mohammed Sirajuddin by the fundamentalist group while its opponents came up with a clear warning of thwarting much move. Had there been no situation demanding more attention as that of the catastrophic cyclone, the matter could by now give rise to a heated-battle in the parliament.

Although a democratically elected government is in power, it is a pity that very little has been done to restore peace and academic discipline in Chittagong University. One feels sorry to know that so called 'political ambition' or 'direct involvement' of some teachers in matters of 'students politics' is making the atmosphere more clumsy day by day.

It is necessary to think whether the Universities in Bangladesh have been established to impart 'political education' to students or to make them worthy citizens providing favourable academic atmosphere. If university is considered as an ideal place for the pursuit of knowledge, involvement of students in larger numbers in matters other than studies cannot be appreciated. What, personally feel is that pupils get in touch with the University for a brief period. The Academic Curriculum of

the university is planned in such a manner that allocation of too much time for the sake of 'politics' will obviously hamper their progress in studies. Repeated shifting of examination date causing session jam is such an example. My suggestion is that the university authorities should strive to create a situation where students can study freely without being disturbed by political 'elements'.

However, I do not mean to isolate students totally from politics. Their involvement in it should be bound by ideology, necessity or emergency arising out of an extra-ordinary circumstances such as, when the country's sovereignty is threatened by external aggression or when, say, autocracy raises its head. In this context, the role played by APSU in the ouster of an autocrat like Ershad will never be forgotten by future posterity. But now, under the changed circumstance, Pupils should so back to studies and strive to enhance the prestige of the nation.

The government should take steps for reopening of Chittagong University immediately. Since President is the Chancellor of all the universities he can bring about some changes exercising his power, aiming at welfare of the students and their guardians! The law-enforcing agencies should also cooperate with the government and the university authority to restore peace and academic discipline.

It is learnt that some students are thinking to switch over to pass course leaving their cherished honours curriculum behind for fear getting logged is a matter of serious concern. Guardians are warned about the future of their ward. Such a stalemate should not prevail any longer. Our students have had supreme sacrifices for the nation. In turn, adequate safety and security should be ensured in order that they can prosecute higher studies unhindered.

Md. Atiquil Karim  
Zikatala, Dhaka.