

Dhaka, Sunday, July 7, 1991

District Development Councils

The members of the Jalalabad Association in Dhaka has called for the formation of a greater Sylhet Development Council to speed up the development process of the area. This journal welcomes the idea and considers it worthy of emulation by the representatives of other regions of the country as well.

It is a well known fact that in a unitary form of government, such as ours, the capital tends to suck up the resources from all over the country. We are particularly guilty of this phenomenon as the capital city now presents quite a contrast to the scene common in the district towns. Even the port cities of Chittagong and Khulna have been neglected to fulfill the grandiose dreams of those who hold power in Dhaka.

Our districts have not only been neglected by the governments of the day, they have also been neglected by their own inhabitants. Thus we see that whenever somebody receives a high professional degree or sets up his or her own business enterprise, it is to Dhaka they shift. There is a constant resource and brain drain from the districts to the capital city.

This one way flow of resources and talent will have to be stopped, and then later, if possible, reversed. If we are to spread the benefits of development and let the people of the whole country — and not those of the capital city alone — enjoy the benefits of growth, then we will have to devise a mechanism which will be able to help the government in channelling development activities to the districts.

If we take the example of Sylhet we will see that though its resource base is comparatively better — one factor being the remittances from residents abroad — yet its development is just as unplanned and backward. One principal reason for this is the absence of a body that can take a total view of the needs and priorities of a district and advise the government accordingly. In this regard the setting up of a development council or something to this effect seems like an worthwhile idea.

Such councils, making up of representatives of the districts can undertake their own programmes and activities to disseminate information about their areas. They can hold seminars with the members of the private sector to attract investment to their respective districts. They can also set up an investment advisory system which can guide the proper utilisation of investments that are flowing in from abroad. Such district oriented development councils, or whatever else they may be called, which should purely be non-governmental bodies, can also act as intermediaries between various departments of the government to develop comprehensive development projects. They can also assist the authorities in identifying and raising additional resources and expertise and thereby assist the process of development.

With the establishment of democracy and a parliamentary form of government the role of such development bodies can now be more effective. They can help their respective Members of Parliament to push for the cause of their districts inside the House and can act as lobby groups and hold discussions with other MPs and parliamentary committees to plead their causes.

The reality of our society is that most of the professionals, businessmen, bureaucrats and other highly placed people — almost all of them — are based in Dhaka. These people, along with those who are living in their respective districts, can together form powerful bodies which can do a lot in promoting the development of their respective areas.

We are not certain as to what actual form such a body should take. But the idea behind the proposal of the Jalalabad Association merits serious consideration by the government, and also by the representatives of other districts. Unless we are able to create some sort of forum or body which will promote and constantly push for the development activities of all our districts, it is unlikely that an equitable development will take place contributing to the welfare of the country as a whole.

Plant a Tree — Now

Now is the time for all to plant trees. So says a government advertisement in Bengali appearing on The Daily Star of Friday. The Forest Department exhorts readers of the paper to collect their saplings from the Forest establishment nearby and plant the same 'this very day' and be particular about the maintenance of the sapling.

What do such stray advertisements amount to? The piece is paid for in order that it is responded to. How can this be expected to do that? There must exist more effective means to persuade people to go for planting trees regularly and encouraging others to do so. And they do exist. But these avenues would not be utilised as long as the task of growing a 25 per cent forest cover for our land remains exclusively a Forest Department job — and the whole of the remaining parts of the juggernaut stands aloof without having any kind of stake in it.

Instead of exhorting the faceless readers of newspapers almost all of whom reside in the space-hungry urban areas and most of whom again live in rented flats — the government could do very well by heeding that age-old adage — charity begins at home.

How many spots of property does our government own or rent in the whole of the country? Lakhs may be. Can the government not require of those running these places not to leave a square metre of soil ungreen? How much khas land still is in direct government ownership? How many trees have they?

To get down closer to earth — let us talk of government schools and colleges. We would urge the government to heed the example set by Mr Mohammad Hanif, who in barely three years of taking over as the Principal of the renowned B M College of Barisal has planted on his campus tens of thousands of trees. In his previous assignment he had worked the same miracle in the Hatem Ali College. Please try to imagine the spacious university campuses of Chittagong and Rajshahi and others being 'treed' in the same fashion.

People need examples, not exhortations. People go for trendiness. It is for the government and social and political leadership to set a huge trend of planting trees. Advertisements taken out once in a year and that too half-heartedly can only cost the government heavily and buy nothing in return.

Democratic Government Beyond the Parliament

by ASHK Sadique

A milestone has been reached in the social and political history of the nation by BNP agreeing to move a constitution amendment bill for a Parliamentary form of government. I refer to it as a milestone not because of the form of government, which is though, an excellent thing to happen. I refer to the consensus reached among the political parties on the form of government. This consensus is the milestone which augurs well for a sustained progress towards democracy in the country.

The election to the parliament was a beautiful beginning. Hung parliament or not, it has made its mark. The State power has been passed on to the people's representatives, notwithstanding the serious differences of opinion between the government and the opposition benches and, on occasions, near acrimonious debates. The dark cloud in the horizon resulting from the misgivings of the Acting President on the actual locus of State power, the constitutional versus the defacto situation, aired to the nation by him so forthrightly, although with statesmanlike restraint, is thankfully passing.

The parliament has established the superstructure of people's representation. But it will be difficult for the parliament, by itself, to withstand the constant invidious onslaught of would be dictators. It is now the time to consolidate the gains by creating the edifice on which the system can rest and thrive, that is, by

establishing democratic local governments.

Some kind of formal local representative governments have been experimented with for nearly three generations, from the days of the Village Self Government Act of 1919. Limited franchise in the course of time gave way to universal adult suffrage. In later years Field Marshal Ayub Khan, the military dictator of Pakistan, changed the system. The union boards were replaced by union councils and district boards, which had elected chairmen, were replaced by district councils with appointed officials as chairman. New tiers, not quite representative, viz, thana councils and divisional councils, were formed. Under the dictate of the Field Marshal, these councils were also headed by government officials. These officials, in conformity with the past British Raj tradition, were always persons from outside the concerned districts. The idea of placing officials from outside the districts to head these councils stemmed from several notions. One was that the people, the citizens, are not to be trusted. Another was that the government and the people were two distinct entities that of the ruler and the ruled. Further, that the senior officials must be from outside the district, so that they could maintain a distance from the local population, especially from their politics, and do the bidding of the central authority, disregarding the wishes and preferences of the affected people.

Before the usurpation of State power by the Field Marshal, some facade of political norm and morality was maintained. The chairman of district boards were not under the supervision of any government official, although the Divisional Commissioner, a civil servant, was the controlling officer of district boards for approval of budget and audit purposes. These boards were actually controlled by the provincial government. But the facade ended there. The result of elections were not sacrosanct. The provincial government could disregard the result of elections and at any time supersede a district or union board to take over their administrations. The practice was a throw back to the days of the Raj, which the later democratically elected leaders of the provincial government did not care to change, but instead used it for their own political ends. This disregard for the sanctity of voters' rights ran throughout the elective hierarchy. As the provincial government could supersede elected district and union boards, so the central government could (and actually did) supersede elected provincial governments. The final nail in the coffin of local representative government was the system of upazila parishads to facilitate further and defacto centralization of power by the national government, introduced by a Bengali version of military dictator, Lt Gen (Retd) HM Ershad.

Talking about the British

and their Raj, they seemed to be suffering from Dr Jeckyl and Mr Hyde syndrome. While one must not forget their determination to maintain the Raj mostly through devious means, they also left a legacy of the due process of law. In our own wisdom we have very ably destroyed this legacy. One example was the system that the sanction enforcing instruments of State power should be subject to civilian and judicial supervision.

An instrument of State sanction is the police force. During the days of the Raj and the early period of Pakistani days, before the Field Marshal consolidated his hold over Pakistan and Bangladesh, this force at the field level was utilized as an instrument of magistracy which was subject to review by senior judicial officers. The field level force was the actual law enforcing agency with inherent legal rights. The headquarters, as the name suggests, that is, the inspector general, was more of a supervisory and monitoring authority. This was also changed in time, to suit 'our own genius' (The Field Marshal was quite fond of this expression). The force was taken out of the magistracy supervision, so that it could be used directly and openly for political ends. We can now see and assess the result.

One must hasten to add that even the formal magistracy control was not also free of political nuance. The magistrates were non-locals of the districts and could be influenced with

promise of reward of better appointments, promotions, etc. Some magistrates did take advantage of the promises and were duly rewarded, but those who did not want to appease, could remain independent. The ideal situation was when both the magistrate and the police chief were high minded honest persons. The district was then largely spared of arbitrary actions. But it is worth repeating that all these officials were imposed from the central authority upon the local population. This was an inherent weakness and a basic cause of instability of the superstructure, the representative government at the apex.

Removal of Weaknesses

The remedy lies in the removal of the weakness. The political parties, in the government and in the opposition, must review the present system and develop a consensus for a reform. Actually the word reform is an under statement. Some basic changes has to be introduced. Learning from the past, a proposition for change is made here.

But firstly about the parliament. The members must agree to become full time parliamentarians, with no hang up about local administration. The members must devote their time fully to national legislative work, and to monitor, review, debate and lay down national policies in respect of all administrative matters, but leave the actual day to day administration and decision making in the hands of ministers of the government. The members must not become mini presidents of the constituencies/districts and not use relief goods or food for work materials as a source of patronage. The people elect them to run the national affairs, not to manage local governments. Appointing them as local council chairman or city administrators/mayors is a negation of democratic principles, a rebuff to voters' rights.

Tiers of Local Councils

I propose that there should be several tiers of elective local councils with commensurate functions and responsibilities and with taxation powers. Taking into account the historical precedent and the population and geographic factors, these administrative tiers should ideally be the village level, union level, district level and division level. The divisions could be called provinces. The current four administrative divisions will be four provinces. Over the next 30-40 years, the old districts (the greater districts as is now commonly known) could become provinces. Likewise the present villages, unions and districts could be retained unless there is a demand for redrawing of boundaries to take into account changed situation e.g. change of river courses, redirection of economic links, etc. These could also be mutated after 30 years or so. As Bangladesh is ethnically and linguistically a homogeneous country, only administrative and economic necessities will be the deciding factors.

These councils will, at various levels, have functions and responsibilities for such local affairs as administration of land, maintenance of law and order, administration of justice below the supreme court, road and river communication within the respective boundaries (the national government will have jurisdiction over inter provincial communication) and implementation of industrial and commercial policies formulated at the national level.

The tenure of the different levels of councils will be short to make them effectively democratic and put a damper on vote buying. The village government will have yearly tenure, the union and district councils two yearly tenure and the provincial government three yearly tenure. In order to

make this system take roots and bloom, it is essential that there should be no law to allow supersession of these governments. They must run the full tenure without impediment, unless they themselves vote to dissolve the councils and seek new election. But considering the short span, it is hardly likely that they will wish it so. Furthermore, it is imperative that all the personnel to service the responsibilities should be recruited and appointed locally, by the various tiers, without assignments from a central authority. The national government will have liaison officers at provincial levels.

Constitutional Provision

The suggestions are not utopian nor impractical. These could be implemented over a period of time, say 3 years. What is necessary is to make constitutional provision for it now for local representative governments and local civil services. What is needed even more than a constitutional change is for the political parties to make indepth study of their long term plans for re-establishing representative government in the country and open debates in different forums on the various possible alternatives. This column is not a place for moralizing or sermonizing the political parties. But let me restate the obvious and the well known. People have various levels of needs, their immediate local requirements and their national aspirations. They know better what their local wishes, requirements and preferences are, and how they want to manage their own immediate communities. These should not be left to the dictation from the top and implemented by officials who have no long term interest in the local communities. These should be decided and implemented democratically at the local level. And there lies the crux of the problem, the fear at the national level that some or even many of these local communities may decide to elect representatives of different hues than that at national level. The political party controlling the centre may feel badly about it, but it is not necessarily ominous for the nation. This should be part of the democratic political game.

We all do agree (don't we?) that democracy is not a rabble rousing slogan only to motivate street demonstrations against military rulers. It is an idea for which people have died; it is essentially a way of life, a summation of a contract between individuals and the society, and between one group of people with other groups to settle their differences peacefully and in mutual tolerance, without recourse to violence or suppression of divergent opinions. In a national context it should mean a system in which uniform decisions are taken for all citizens, whether individuals or groups who hold different opinions on any matter. It subsumes that the decision aims to further a common cause for the benefit of the society as a whole. Its precondition is that the people who are affected by a decision freely participate in the decision making process either directly or through representatives, while conceding that any particular view, especially the minority view, may not be accepted. Unavoidably majority opinion will prevail, until and unless the once minority opinion can transform the majority. But ideally mutual tolerance should develop into consensus in most cases. The responsibility of the leaders of political parties is to make it happen.

The author is former Secretary, Industry and Defence, Govt of Bangladesh and a former UNIDO adviser on industrial development for Asia-Pacific. He also served as Principal Secretary to the President Mr Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury.

South-east Asia

Integrate or Not to Integrate?

Economic dynamism, rather than political initiative, may yet bring about the long dreamed of integration of South-east Asia's economies.

As trade alliances come up elsewhere in the world, there is an increasing trend toward forging links within the region and creating 'economic growth triangles' in South-east Asia.

South Korea has been designated a 'dialogue partner' of the six-member Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN). And the countries of Indochina and Burma may join as ASEAN members.

China may be admitted to the Asia-Pacific Economic Conference (APEC), a Pacific grouping consisting of ASEAN and Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, Japan and South Korea.

The idea of economic growth triangles is acquiring momentum. The linking of the economies of Singapore to that of the Malaysian state of Johor and Indonesia's Riau islands in a triangle of trade, investment and business has had echoes elsewhere in the region.

A similar triangle involving the northern Malaysian island of Penang, southern Thailand and north Sumatra in Indonesia is now being studied. There are prospects of another triangle including the eastern Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah.

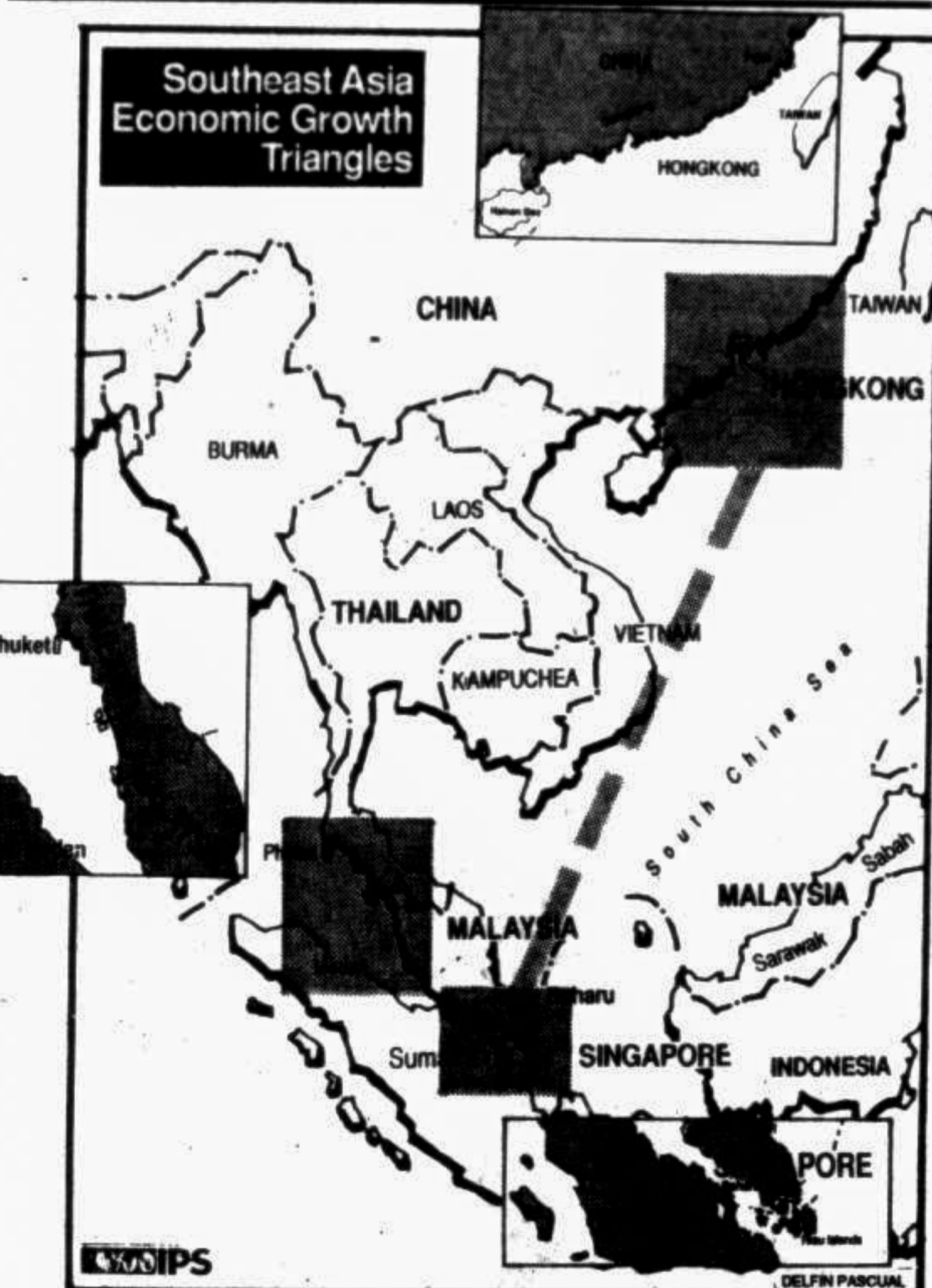
In China, southern Guangdong province has been linked with Hong Kong in the Shenzhen special economic zone. Similar plans are in the offing for Fujian province in the north and for the Zhuhai-Macau area in the south.

Singapore may soon be linked to this newly developing triangle in East Asia if the recent visit to Shenzhen of Singapore's Minister for Trade and Industry Lee Hsien Loong is any indication.

The island republic is apparently keen to lend its expertise in helping develop special economic zones and serving as the conduit for transnational capital and investment.

To a growing body of academics and economic analysts,

Economic experts believe that the momentum towards forging multi-layered links in South-east Asia region could very well lead to greater integration of the region's economies. Surya Gangadharan of IPS writes from Singapore.



such frenetic activity adds up to one inescapable conclusion — that these multi-layered, sub-regional groupings will collectively lead to a broader economic integration.

It was this kind of disorderly formula that proved the key to success in Europe," said political science professor Paul Evans of Canada's York University.

"It could well be so in the making of a new economic order in Asia-Pacific," wrote Evans Trends' journal of the Singapore-based Institute of South-east Asian Studies

(ISEAS). To be sure, the Malaysian-sponsored East Asian Economic bloc has yet to take off, mainly because of the disinclination of Japan — the dominant economic power in the region — to endorse it.

The Asean countries of Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia have yet to accept APEC for fear of being swallowed by the big powers of the United States, Canada and Japan.

But Lee Tsao Yuan, deputy director of the Institute of

Policy Studies here, believes there are exciting prospects ahead for South-east Asia as a special economic zone.

"Whether they are achievable depends on how willingly governments transcend narrow self-interest and national prejudice, and how ready they are to accept that there are benefits to accrue from thinking regional," Lee said.

The euphoria of high growth and cooperation, said Lee, tended to obscure questions of national sovereignty, currency domination and foreign policy.

In currency, for example, Singapore has always discouraged the internationalisation of the Singapore dollar. Similar problems exist with the Malaysian ringgit and the Indonesian rupiah.

Ironically, socialist China is showing the way. In the Shenzhen special economic zone and Guangdong province, it is the Hong Kong dollar which has been accepted as the dominant currency.

Sree Kumar, a research fellow at the ISEAS, points to another problem. "Growth could slow down if the differences in comparative advantage among neighbours diminish," he said.

Industry, which is always seeking lower production costs and higher profits, could divert its investments elsewhere, explained Kumar.

This problem is multiplied in South-east Asia where transnational cooperations have led the drive to industrialise.

Most TNC's pursue "flexible production strategies", noted Kumar. Thus, they tend to shift production bases when labour costs (usually 15 per cent of total operating costs) go up.

This trend gets accentuated when currency volatility increases.

The practice of locating units close to "brain centres" where research, design and development takes place, also makes South-east Asian triangles very vulnerable, said Kumar.

"There is therefore a need to encourage a wider indigenous industrial base in South-east Asia," said Kumar.

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.

Development of northern districts

Sir, It is good that the new government is keen to develop the less developed regions of the country. To remove the bottle necks faced by the private sector in the areas the government, like the past governments, may declare some concessions in the industrial policy for the entrepreneurs of the backward regions. But concessions alone in respect of payment of comparatively low rates of taxes, duties, simplification of sanctioning procedure, relaxation of formalities etc., may not yield spectacular result. So far as the northern

districts are concerned, it would be worthwhile to analyse the causes of the past failure.

There is an acute irregularity in supply of electricity. The sooner the continuity of its supply is ensured, the better for industrialisation. There is no gas. The region needs to be supplied with gas for commercial and domestic use. In the field of communication the northern districts are the most backward area. Many important places are still deprived of any mentionable road while many of the important roads are in deplorable condition. Similar is the condition of the railway communication. The tele-communication facil-

ity within the region also is not modern.

Steps to modernise Mongla Port with storage facilities and improved communication by rail and road to and from the port may help bring about the desired results. A refinery at Khulna will reduce the cost of petroleum products.

The construction of Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge will serve the purpose to the greatest extent.

The northern districts are primarily dependent on agriculture. In respect of production of sugar and tobacco, the whole country is dependent on the northern part. In respect of paddy, pulse, onion, zinger etc. more than 65% of the country's requirement is met by the northern districts. But deforestation particularly due to the absence of gas aggravates the agricultural problem there. There is an abrupt fall in the underground water level and drought is a common phenomenon now. So the number

of deep tubewells needs to be increased and water reservoirs need to be built up.

The trade, commerce and industry particularly in the northern part of the country are in their infancy. There is as yet no sound footing of the required amount of subsidies, assistance and protection from various corners. The single chamber perhaps fails to serve the purpose of the less developed region. The government's latest action to have a separate chamber for industries at the national level bears testimony to the fact that the single chamber at a certain stage fails to serve the purpose.

In a single chamber, the traders or the people of the developed region have wider scope of claiming and establishing supremacy over that of the less developed region because of their better knowledge, information, communication and public relations. To remove the obstacles that stand in the way of economic,

commercial and industrial development in the less developed region, the feasibility of having a separate Chamber of Commerce and Industries for the less developed region particularly for the northern region may be looked into.

Md Anwarul Afzal Rantnagar, Naogaon.

Accountability

Sir, Several large prestigious enterprises undertaken after liberation, continue to be sick since start up. Even the sale volume of some enterprises cannot meet the wages, salaries and other benefits of the employees, it is said. Those responsible for wasting the nation's scarce resources, are no longer associated in managing those losing concerns. However, under the above backdrop let the new government study again the viability of those enterprises by engaging local and if necessary, foreign consultants. If PDB can run with about 40%

or more system loss, not a single enterprise is loosing in this context!

Sadik Alee, Maghbar, Dhaka.

Islamic research

Sir, Several letters have so far been published in the columns of national dailies urging the government to introduce a national level award in the discipline of Islamic research and publication. The past autocratic government did not pay much attention to the matter. Now we would request the new democratic government for the same.

In this field, we have already proposed the name of eminent Islamic scholar Syed Ashraf Ali for such a national award in recognition to his outstanding contribution in the field of Islamic research and publication.

M. Zahidul Haque Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka-1207.