

The Aborted Exams

The government on July 11 scrapped the on-going Secondary School Certificate examinations of the Comilla Board. It had to take the extreme measure in view of large-scale leaking of examination papers of four subjects. Even for a perennially scandal-ridden Bangladesh this was too much. This is possibly the first time in over a hundred years that an SSC, or matriculation or entrance examination has been scrapped by the whole lot. While the wisdom of the measure may be open to debate — the exasperation created by the scandal amongst the community of examinees and their guardians and teachers and education officials and finally the government can very well be imagined and appreciated.

The scrapping is going to very adversely affect the rhythm of the SSC and HSC examinations of that Board brought largely to a healthy one after earlier problems of the same nature. Lakhs of pupils will suffer and the broadest link in the academic chain injured — because of this leaking business. Society at large has very rightly reacted in demanding harsh punishment to those responsible for the crime. Prevailing law provides for up to four years' imprisonment and a hefty fine for the culprits. The government is already thinking of raising it to 10 years.

A high-powered enquiry committee has been formed with a retired Supreme Court Judge at its head. The detective branch has been charged with doing the necessary digging and exposing. It is easy to read in all these stern and prompt actions the government's determination to firmly prevent any repetition of the scandal. Will it be cynical to recall that attempts by the earlier governments had always very impressively failed to nab and punish even one single culprit in the cases of all earlier examination paper leaking?

While the enquiry committee is on its job, nothing may be done to influence or prejudice its findings. Still, it is in public interest to get certain points relating to the working of the examinations right.

First — that the examination papers take on the appearance and format of papers only at a very specially secured press. Any leaking at the setting stages — at the Board or at the fabrication stages at the press is rather easy to track down. The total number of personnel involved in the process before the papers are security packed and transported to the examination centres do not exceed two dozens. This part of the thing complete — the whole game passes on to the executive branch of governance — plainly DCs and magistrates, UNOs and the police take over.

Secondly, — the leakings this year as well as in the recent past have all taken place sporadically and locally — very evidently not centrally, in places like Fatikchhari, Nazirhat, Hathazari in Chittagong and at Laxmipur in greater Noakhali, and not in cities like Chittagong, Sylhet or Comilla. This rather clearly points to loose security on the part of the local examination supervision machines manned exclusively by the executive officers and police personnel — the whole thing having nothing to do with the Board set-up in Comilla.

What is ironic in this most unfortunate matter is that — in view of earlier similar scandals under the same Board — the Board authority had twice proposed extra cautionary measure in very precisely formulated communications to the executives in charge of the areas prone to leaking. The Board's exertions have come to nothing.

Cries have been raised in Chittagong to set-up a different Board for Chittagong. It is too early to know that this can stop leaking and paying it any attention before the rotting links in the chain — and the culprits involved — have been identified will simply be foolish.

Shameful Behaviour

We have known for a while that Dhaka University campus was a dangerous place where we might get shot if caught in the cross fire of rival students' groups. We have also been aware that our cars, motor bikes or auto rickshaws might get burnt if we happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. But now, thanks to what happened on Monday, we know that we might get beaten up while doing something as simple and ordinary as posting a letter at the GPO. While so doing if we have the 'audacity' to ask a question twice, even if it because the postal employee did not answer my question the first time, then we have our skull cracked by flying paper weights or ink pots or whatever else there is provided, with the tax payers' money, to serve the public.

The GPO incident, in which reported the postal employees in a gang attacked the customers, is one that has raised a serious concern among the public. An institution whose basic function is public service is now faced with the situation where a section of its employees can think of physically attacking the public for demanding services which they are paid for to render!

The authorities concerned must view the breach of discipline very seriously. As press reports indicate, the 'spark' that started it all was caused by an irate employee virtually climbing over the service counter to attack a customer whose only fault was to have asked for a second time an information that he either did not get or did not understand the first time. Obviously the whole story does not lie in the incident itself. Public complaints have been on the rise against the postal employees, especially those who are at the GPO. To be rudely talked to is something the public has learnt to live with for long. But what has become intolerable is the time it now requires to get the simplest thing done. First, the counters are not sufficient to meet the public need. Secondly, the shortage is made acute by the slow pace of work that is now the norm. Very often an employee managing a counter will suddenly disappear on one pretext or another, leaving a long queue of people unattended. Worse, he will just close the counter for this or that technical reason.

The question of discipline, and accountability is something that the postal authorities must restore among their employees. Official inquiry on Monday's incidence must delve deep into short term and long term reasons for such an outburst. They must be made to realise that what has happened has seriously tarnished whatever image there was left of our postal service.

We do not consider Monday's incidence to be a purely isolated one. The extent of its violence was unusual and rare. But the overall malaise that caused it, was not. And it is to remove that deep seated malaise that the government must act now.

AROUND 87 per cent of our present population of 115 million live in 64,000 villages. The 22 million acres of cultivable land constitute the primary source of living for 100 million people. With too many people chasing too few acres of land, the standard of living is bound to be miserable. Indeed only two-thirds of a bigha of land per capita is available. Unless we industrialise on a gigantic scale, we cannot ever break out the cycle of poverty and underdevelopment. Majority of the labour force must derive income and employment from industry and service sectors.

How to do it? The march from poverty to growth is a difficult and an uphill task. But other countries even under worse situations have done it. Given the determination we can do it as well.

That two-thirds of a bigha of land per head of the rural population at present produce only 116 kgs of paddy per annum; it is feasible, except in case of deep water Aman paddy, to increase the yield to 446 kgs of Aman paddy followed by a second crop of 330 kgs of maize. In quantitative terms it would imply an increase of as much as 669 per cent. A similar rate of increase of GDP would take us to the NIC status within the lifetime of the majority of us living today.

At the next stage, paddy and maize produced should lead to agro-processing resulting in the manufacture of not only polished rice but also rice bran oil, corn sugar, paddy straw pulp and fuel concentrates from the husk. At the third state, the deoiled rice bran cake and maize combined with other ingredients would lead to the manufacture of poultry feed — the basis for a large modern poultry industry for income and employment of the landless rural poor.

The fuel concentrates can meet the household needs and also constitute energy source for brick fields — an essential

Agrarian Reform Compulsory for Economic Growth

input for all rural construction schemes. The rice husk ash mixed with limestone can be processed into inferior cement substitute but good enough for low-cost rural housing.

Imagine ten million acres of such intensive paddy — maize double cropping. It should lead to the setting up of at least 1,000 such integrated multiple processing plants in 200 upazila headquarters of Bangladesh. This constitutes the beginning of the industrialisation movement.

In order to promote such intensive cultivation, fertiliser blending plants should be feasible at upazila level. Quality seeds would be required which can be organised through seed treatment, preservation and marketing enterprises. Sprayers for pesticides, irrigation pumps and tubewells, land cultivation equipment, thrashers, dryers etc. are also required which create the prospects for setting up small and medium scale metal working and foundry industries, also at the upazila level.

Increased Output

Above all, the increased output in spite of the minuscule land holdings would increase farm level demands for basic consumer goods like clothes, various plastic products, consumer electronics, bicycles etc. Further more, increased agricultural production and agro-processing would lead to enhanced demand for transportation of goods and services. Small trucks and vans will be necessary. Manufacture of such consumer goods or components thereof should lead to the setting up of a variety of small and medium scale industries at upazila headquarter-

land taken over from them. Along with such investment cash compensation, long term investment credit must be added. Such land surrendering households would then be enabled through technical and management assistance to set up small and medium scale enterprises around the upazila headquarters which normally enjoy locational and other infrastructural advantages compared to the surrounding countryside.

Second, in case of absentee landowners whose interest in land have become all the more remote, the best option would

and their emergence as the entrepreneurial class — the vital agents for economic growth in any democratic society. According to my own rough estimates, around eight to nine hundred thousand of such landowning households, absentee or otherwise, exist in Bangladesh today and they would spearhead the task of setting up the vast multitudes of upazila enterprises as envisaged. In China, the town and village enterprises over a ten-year period of development has been responsible for creating 100 million non-farm jobs. One-tenth of that number of jobs within the year 2000 would accomplish a gigantic social and economic revolution in Bangladesh.

Land taken over from the non-farming households and all other cultivable lands owned by the real tillers of the soil would then be subjected to a detailed consolidation and settlement programme in order to realize the fundamental condition of small size owner-operated farms.

Government must assume the role of the dominant land owner in order to bring about the desired agrarian structure. In a upazila taken up under the agrarian reform scheme, a total land use map and a water development programme involving flood control, irrigation and drainage should simultaneously be in place. Next in line would be the crucial task of organising one and two hectare consolidated farms and setting them to the real farming households. In an upazila with 20,000 hectares of net cultivable land, 13,500 farmers would thus be settled. The supplies and services re-

quired by them would be met by the upazila enterprises.

How the scheme would be financed? If we assume that only half of the net cultivable land of 21 million acres is owned by the non-farming households and again 50% thereof are absentee owners, then 525,000 acres of land per annum over a ten-year period would require investment cash compensation. The question then arises as to what should be the rate of such compensation. The most dominant crop of the land is transplanted Aman rice whose present yield is half a ton per acre. So without any crop failure, the non-farming household would receive 3.7 tons of rice per acre over a 15-year period from the share-croppers whose value at the inflated rate of Taka ten per kg comes to Tk 37,000 only. This might be a fair rate of compensation. But I agree that it looks like a back-of-the-envelope calculation. It definitely requires much more detailed work and such compensation cannot be fixed at a uniform rate. Suppose the compensation rate works out at Tk 50,000 per acre; even then the total investment cash compensation for 525,000 acres of land each year stands at around Tk 2,600 crores which it should be possible to mobilise out of domestic resources, counterpart funds and foreign assistance only at the initial stage. This is because a land tax at the rate of 5% of the gross output value from such intensive irrigated land should generate sufficient financial resources to pay for the cost of the scheme in the long run of 10 to 15 years. Thus unlike other rural development schemes, it is an investment in development which can be paid back by the farmers themselves. Even if considerable subsidy is involved, it will be a worthwhile effort and there is no reason to shy away from the large annual outlay of 2,600 crores.

There are three basic components of the scheme. First, rural households whose lands are not owner-operated and cultivation is carried out by the 'baraders' or other types of leaseholders should be entitled to investment cash against the

From LDC to NIC by Shahed Latif

to obtain compensation in terms an equivalent share in an existing state enterprise which is being privatised. Take for example a jute mill valued at Taka one billion. At the compensation rate of Tk 100,000 per acre (hypothetical figure), 10,000 acres of such land belonging to absentee owners can be taken over by the government through denationalisation of the jute mill. In order to make such shares attractive, a certain minimum rate of return may be guaranteed. Also such shares should be freely transferable through the stock markets.

Chinese Model

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Islands Issue Still on Kaifu's Mind

Haruko Watanabe writes from Tokyo

The unresolved issue of Japanese territory still occupied by the USSR is bound to influence how Japan plays its hand at the G-7 economic summit meeting now being held in London — to which Mikhail Gorbachev, embarrassingly for Premier Kaifu — has succeeded in getting himself invited as an aid-seeking guest (Gorbachev is due today, July 17, the last day of the three-day summit)

THREE months after the first-ever visit of a Soviet head of state to Japan, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and Japanese Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu meet again, this time in London for the summit of the Group of Seven nations.

The so-called G-7 Summit brings together the world's top industrial countries: The Soviet Union, which is not a member, has succeeded in winning a formal invitation and has made it clear that it will be seeking massive economic aid.

Japan, as a G-7 member, would certainly be expected to shell out, from its brimming reserves of yen, in any coordinated package of assistance. Many Japanese are worried whether Mr. Kaifu will be able to stand firm against such pressures and to maintain a cardinal principle of Tokyo's conduct of its relations with the USSR: "inseparability of political and economic questions."

This principle derives from the "islands issue" — the retention by the Soviets of the occupied territories in the north. The issue will not of course be on the G-7 agenda. But it will never be far from the Japanese leader's mind; and he cannot afford to miss any chances of reminding Mr.

Gorbachev, one way or another, of its importance.

The other six G-7 countries are split over whether to offer economic assistance to the Soviets. Germany, France, Italy and Canada are eager to help Gorbachev because they believe a stable Soviet Union is a crucial element in global stability. The United States and Britain maintain a more prudent attitude.

Six sessions between Mr. Kaifu and Mr. Gorbachev in April failed to resolve major twin issues — Japan's demand for the return of the Soviet-occupied Northern Territories and Soviet expectations of comprehensive economic aid.

Japan has so far stuck to its line that "political and economic issues cannot be treated separately." In other words, "return the occupied islands in order to get economic aid." Japan wants the return of all four islands or at least the

return of two islands plus the recognition of Japan's sovereignty over the remaining two.

After Mr. Gorbachev indicated his willingness to discuss the Northern Territories, Japan's expectations reached a new high despite deep-rooted mistrust of the Soviets and scepticism over Mr. Gorbachev's power in a country beset by domestic and economic problems.

The Japanese are very sensitive about the way the Northern Territories were seized. Kazuichi Matsuzaki, head of the Japanese League for the Return of the Northern Territories, has called the Soviets *kajiba borobo* ("thieves looting a fire site") indicating conduct below contempt even for professional crooks. His outrage is shared by many Japanese.

The Northern Territories, comprising four islands, has a total land area of 4,996 square

kilometres, or about the size of Brunel. It lies northeast of Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost major island.

When Japan was defeated in 1945 by Allied Forces, 17,385 people lived there, working in fishing and canning industries. When the second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki on August 9, three days after the first atomic bomb exploded over Hiroshima, the Soviet Union declared war in violation of the Neutrality Pact it signed with Japan in 1941.

Three days after Japan's surrender, the Soviet Union invaded the Kurile Islands north of the Northern Territories. It completed the invasion of the Northern Territories on September 3. Japan renounced the Kurile Islands and southern Sakhalin in accordance with the San Francisco Peace Treaty on September 8, 1951. However, the four Northern Territories

islands were not included in the Kurile Islands.

The Soviet Union refused to sign the San Francisco Treaty. And when the Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration of 1956 restoring diplomatic relations between the two countries was inked, the Soviets indicated they would return the Habomai islets and Shikotan island upon the conclusion of a peace treaty with Japan. Japan responded that the four islands must be returned to Japan first before any peace treaty was signed.

When Japan and the United States renewed their security treaty in 1960, the Soviets announced the "resolution" of the Northern Territories issues. But when then Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka visited Soviet Secretary General Leonid Brezhnev in 1973, both agreed that the Northern Territories issue remained unresolved. The Soviets later denied

the existence of any territorial issue, a position which remained the same until Mr. Gorbachev said the Soviets recognised Japan's claims to the islands. This was included among the issues he was prepared to discuss in the Tokyo last April.

Mr. Kaifu and Mr. Gorbachev, in a joint statement, agreed to work towards a peace treaty based on "all positive developments." However, at separate press conferences, Japan and Soviet Union put differing interpretations on the statement.

Mr. Kaifu said that while the Soviet Union promised in 1956 to return the Habomai islets and Shikotan island, the four Northern Territories islands have to be returned. Mr. Gorbachev said, "We did not revive what has not come into existence or what has lost a chance — meaning the statement did not include that part of the 1956 declaration which promised the return of the two islands."

These differences explain why Mr. Gorbachev went home with only US\$1,000 million in aid for emergency food imports. Mr. Kaifu is well aware that if in London he is seen to be moving towards a more "generous" stance, he will be endangering himself politically at home. — *Depthnews Asia*.

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.

VAT affects group interests

Sir, The question is whether national interest will get an upper hand over the group interests? Definitely the sensible reply is 'yes'. In a poor country like ours, where corruption is rampant, whether in the official circle or in the business community, lawlessness and indiscipline all around, be it on the important public roads when occupied by public meetings in peak working hours or with the transport drivers — baby taxis and taxis exhibiting faremeters as show pieces where rules live only in papers inactive and purposeless, it is no wonder that VAT — a disciplined tax recovery system — is being opposed by interested groups and quarters. Although VAT is nothing new but a substitute (a two-in-one) system for sales tax and excise duty, in this system there is little scope for tax evasion, and the authorities can easily verify and cross check evasions because of records and returns at different levels. The only difficulty in this system is that the manufacturers and service bodies have to maintain records and give returns and chalsans in a methodical way which will en-

hance paper works — but it will gradually form a habit of discipline amongst tax payers. On the other hand, it will reduce botheration of tax payers, of being taxed at one stage/head instead at two stages — at import stage and at manufacturing stage previously. Mainly the tax evaders are allergic and panicky about this system. Because VAT will expose income tax evaders by reflecting their real business turn over on records. VAT will indirectly boost income tax revenue also in a big way which means, VAT will enhance government revenue both in VAT (earlier sales tax and excise) sector and income tax sector.

One thing we do not understand that why those who were also previously liable to pay excise duty/sales tax, are opposing it, for them VAT is nothing new or additional tax, but simply a substitute system in a simplified form and in most cases, it is a reduction of taxes with provisions of rebate at different stages. Well, we can assume that many are opposing VAT because of individual interests being affected, some are doing it for nothing because of ignorance about VAT and some are opposing because of their reactionary nature and ideas.

But the cases of those who were not previously liable to pay sales tax and excise duty either are genuine and they should be exempt from VAT as it being a fresh and new tax for them.

But we expect that our government should be strong and strict enough not to submit to the will of self-seekers and tax evaders because of shouts and slogans and processions arranged for — as previous governments compromised with undue demands of various groups and associations at the cost of common people's interest and national interest as well. Let us not forget that the interest of the nation as a whole is above any group or association's interest, however powerful they may be.

Wasim Rahman
Naya Paltan, Dhaka.

Reema murder

Sir, It is learnt through the Press that the condemned prisoner Munir Hossain alias Suruj was produced before the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court on July 13 for trial of alleged attempt to commit suicide by him.

It may be recalled here that Munir was sentenced to death for killing his wife Sharmin Reema on April 9, 1989.

We would request our national Press to keep on publishing follow-ups on the sensational Reema murder case verdict execution.

M. Zahidul Haque
Assistant Professor,
Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka.

Public libraries

Sir, When our educational institutions have apparently failed to carry out the mission of educating young people, the idea of setting up of more and more public libraries throughout the country bears weight.

Educationists of the world are very often of opinion that public libraries are more useful for the spread of education among people than any other institution.

In a large city like Dhaka where millions of people reside and most of whom cannot afford to purchase costly books, magazines and even newspapers there ought to be hundreds of public libraries to facilitate acquisition of knowledge by the masses.

Let there be public libraries in every ward of the city and let there be enlightenment. I would expect those in the authority would pay a heed to the idea.

Abu Isa Chowdhury
South Goran, Dhaka.

University education

Sir, The poor tax payers are to meet the expenditures of Taka 100 crore needed annually in maintaining the several universities and higher educational institutions. The session jam continues though it was expected that the situation will improve with the installation of a new elected government. The situation has not improved, rather it is becoming more crucial with passage of

time. Under the above backdrop should we feel compelled to arrange higher education for 20,000 students annually with that money as mentioned in countries like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand etc. etc. which seems possible? We should close down all universities and higher educational institutions till we are able to manage them properly and give all halls, residential hostels, other buildings etc. for rent as an alternative source of revenue! Lastly it is unfortunate to observe that BUET is holding admission while other institutions are failing to start classes, as many students will join BUET, if selected. Even the very admission tests of HSC pass students cannot be co-ordinated by learned authorities! Who is accountable?

Sadik Alee
Magbazar, Dhaka.

Spurious medicines, adulterated food

Sir, Some one asked me which was a bigger sin — killing an individual or killing a nation? My obvious answer was killing a nation.

Spurious medicines, adulterated food are replacing good medicine and food on the same age-old economic theory of bad money driving good money. Today Dhaka market, nay the entire Bangladesh market, is flooded with spurious medicines, manufactured reportedly in makeshift 'factories' across the river Buriganga, and adulterated food stuff and the traders are

selling them with perfect impunity. No one can point his finger at such deals. The traders do not realise the crime they are doing by supplying the spurious drugs into the market for use by the illiterate mass. In other words they are slowly killing the nation.

Even the authorised licensed manufacturers are often alleged to be manufacturing less potent medicines. Isn't there a law which can be made effective against such practices and the adulterers and their accomplices in the trade be punished severely according to the seriousness of the crime? This stands out No.1 in the crime list.

A M F Quadir
Dhaka-1207

Drug abuse in Pabna

Sir, Recently in many places of Pabna district drug abuse and smugglers appear again in vogue. It may be mentioned that as the administration took necessary steps on earlier occasions so the smugglers were in trouble to pursue their drug trade. But at present heroin and other drugs are sold rather openly in many places of Pabna allowing and enticing our young generation to proceed towards moral decadence.

We seek immediate intervention of the concerned authorities to contain this long standing problem.

Ashfaqur Rahman
Dhalpur, Pabna.