

Dhaka, Monday, August 5, 1991

Short-lived Crisis, We Hope It Is

Awami League chief's statement on Friday followed by the Prime Minister's meeting with the Acting President, which in turn was followed by the latter's threat to resign from the Presidency, created a political crisis. To our great relief the crisis seems to have been short-lived and our gradual transition towards parliamentary form of government appears to be back on track.

Or does it? The crisis was short lived. But is it altogether over? We would very much like to say 'yes'. But can we? What the events of the last three days have revealed is that in spite of the thunderous applause inside the parliament, outside it gaps remain between the position of our two leading political parties on the constitutional amendment issue.

This journal commended BNP, AL and all others for their political sagacity and spirit of accommodation in working out a consensus bill for the changeover to a parliamentary form of government. The sudden coming into question of that consensus, which now appears to be fragile, naturally gives rise to a series of questions in the public mind. As we have said so many times before, not only are we giving institutional form to our long cherished goal of restoring democracy to our people, we are also setting precedents for our posterity to learn from and to use as examples. Therefore, it is not only the fact that we are introducing parliamentary form of government, but doing it all together, that is so important. We are doing so by listening to the other's point of view and then negotiating the issues of our concern in a spirit of accommodation. It was at the end of such a process that the amendment bill, worked out by the select committee, became acceptable to all the negotiating parties.

The universal acceptability of the bill came into question when the leader of the opposition claimed that it contained anti-democratic elements and that it needed to be changed. As she explained in an exclusive interview with this journal (published elsewhere in today's issue) her criticism did not signify that her party will block the passage of the bill, only try to improve it further before it is finally adopted.

We are to some extent relieved at the clarification of AL leader's earlier statement. However, it must be pointed out that certain amount of confusion in the public mind did result from her statement, and a fear did spread, however unjustifiably, that our cherished goal of going for a parliamentary form of government within the shortest possible time is in jeopardy. The points raised by the leader of the opposition may be correct. But one cannot escape the impression that they are not central. Far more important and crucial points of contention have been amicably resolved. If AL wants to claim the credit that they forced BNP to agree to something (parliamentary form of government) that the latter was not committed to, then they must also give BNP the credit for having accepted something that was not originally either in their party manifesto or in their election pledge. Which means that they have come more than half way to reach the consensus that we now have. The question therefore naturally comes, what is Awami League giving up in return?

Democracy, especially in its parliamentary form, is a process of give and take, of accommodation and of compromise. Everybody knows it, including the two leading parties, and especially their two leaders. It is our hope that they will practice what they know to be necessary and must be done. We have waited long enough for democracy and parliamentary form of government. Please do not make us wait much longer.

National Specifications

A low-cost sub-base for country roads, as developed by one of our engineers, is being tested for long five years at Rajbari. Its performance so far has been satisfactory and nothing adverse has come to light as to strength and durability. With some more of such positive results it is hoped that the gigantic public works that is road construction would soon switch over to the new sand-soil mixture sub-base saving us a lot of money in the first place.

Ghulam Mohiuddin, the proud innovator of the new sub-base, says that this would obviate the use of a kind of expensive sand as the sub-base and that because of the presence of a natural binder in the in-situ soil the new sub-base is easily compacted into strength required to take big traffic loads and to endure for long. Moreover, being more labour-intensive and needing no imported mixer facilities this 55:45 sand-soil mix sub-base has been found ideally suited to be worked by local labour with purely local technology. The plus-points of the material has been so convincing that it has been selected as capping layer in the pavement design of the 32 km approach road of the Jamuna Bridge.

We are certain that as necessity is the mother of invention myriads of innovations are coming up in all areas of our national life each day of the year. And yet, foolish that we have been in using and continuing our dependence on imported formulae and specifications on a wholesale basis without caring much to modify them to suit our conditions and requirements, most of the innovations are passing into oblivion without ever being appreciated and put to wide and good use. Mr Mohiuddin's innovation of the new sub-base should open our eyes to the good such locally devised specifications and even whole technologies can do to our economy. A very close example to this should be the development of new building materials out of abundant local ingredients — say the plant *Dhonche*. Or the fabric that can be woven from yarn processed from, say, the pineapple leaves. We haven't so far been able even to can pineapple and jackfruit — why? Is that a case of innovations dying out of sight?

But to come back to the road building sub-base — Mr Aatur Rahman, the R & H chief engineer stressed the importance of evolving our own national specifications for all kinds of building materials which surely would lead not only to economy but to suitability and durability of the constructions made with them. It is strange to know that we didn't even have these ratios and proportions which is basic to any nation's building activity.

SINCE 1989, major changes have occurred in East Europe. In the span of a few months, communist regimes were replaced by pluralistic democracies and, with a few exceptions, without any bloodshed. It was not the first time, that people demonstrated their will to abandon the communist regime and its lack of freedom and welfare. In 1953, demonstration by East German workers were crushed by tanks. In 1956, Budapest was the theater of harsh repression like Prague in 1968.

But, this time, Moscow accepted the changes. The credit has to be given to President Mikhail S. Gorbachev who, since coming to power in 1985, implemented the policies of Glasnost and Perestroika, transparency of information and freedom. The Soviet Leader has realised that the race between capitalism and the so-called socialism was a thing of the past and his country was on the verge of falling apart if he did not change the course of events.

All these changes have brought hopes and expectations throughout Europe.

Of course, the situation varies from country to country. For Germany, it was a real unification; for others, the revival of a European identity.

The opening of the economies of eastern and central Europe has created hopes among East Europeans and the business community throughout the world. Obeying to Keynesian reflex, businessmen see in a market of near 400 millions people, larger than the EEC market, new opportunities for sales and investments. Then, we have the peace dividends brought by diminished military spendings, which have produced favourable political and psychological environment for investment.

The "Brave New World" is born: an era of peace of cooperation is now possible.

THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

New Order: Fears and Hopes

by Serge Degallaix
Special to The Star

Europe — *largo sensu* — from the north Pole to the strait of Gibraltar, from the Atlantic to the Urals — is a major partner of Bangladesh. This country's historical and cultural links with Great Britain are still very intimate and strong while Western Europe is a major trade partner and a leading contributor to development of the country. So, Bangladesh cannot ignore the fate of Europe while Europe cannot ignore the fate of Bangladesh, a friendly country, poor but resilient.

Obviously, the first assessment of events was oversimplified and was not shared by everybody, in Europe as well as in the rest of the world. Let us elaborate on this.

In Europe, some reasons to be preoccupied by the new order appeared early and became stronger months after months.

In the Soviet Union, the internal situation remains uncertain and Gorbachev must still take into account strong forces like the armed forces, KGB or the Communist Party. The economic scenario is worsening — due to the failure of the old system and the delays in launching economic reforms. People have more freedom but they are still waiting for more bread. The question of nationalities has taken on a new dimension with the deepening of old problems, and a greater ability and freedom to express them. On the other hand, the military power remains in place with four millions in uniform, eight millions working for military industries, 35 per cent of the budget and a nuclear capacity which is overwhelmingly sufficient to destroy Europe several times over.

In Eastern and Central European countries, the question of boundaries and nation-

alities have found a new life after the freeze of the Cold War. What is happening in Yugoslavia is ominous in this regard and, it is not the only example in Europe.

The economic situation and the initial sufferings caused by economic reforms are also a matter of great concern. It is difficult to have reliable figures on the standard of living in East Europe but we can estimate it is five times less than in West Europe. This gap is worsening due to the reforms which have brought dislocations before rebuilding a more efficient productive system.

The unification of Germany and the emergence of an economic superpower in the very center of Europe is also considered by many observers as a potential risk for the stability of the continent. With 80 million inhabitants and a strong position and influence in "MittelEuropa," Germany is frightening her neighbours as well as the Soviet Union. Of course, everybody is aware that Germany in 1991 differs profoundly from the Reich of 1871 or 1933; that the commitment to democracy, peace and cooperation is sincere and strong and that Chancellor Helmut Kohl is devoted to the building of Europe. Nevertheless, the apprehen-

sion remains that Germany can be tempted, either by neutralism, by getting the weaponry needed for her self-defence or by using economic power as a means to obtain concessions from her partners.

In the Third World countries, the new European and world order has raised suspicion and fears. Naturally, the decrease in the danger of a nuclear holocaust is welcome and the ability to solve regional problems appears greater now. But, on the other hand, negative impacts are expected.

With the end of the cold war, Third World countries have the feeling that they are no more a significant stake in the competition for influence between East and West. That can mean loss of some advantages, economic or military, diplomatic and political.

With the tremendous need for reconstruction in East Europe, there is a great risk that Europe will focus on herself, and forget her previous commitments to least Developed Countries or LDCs and other developing countries.

The Eastern and Central European countries as well as bilateral and multilateral donors which will help East Europe will be heavy borrowers on the world capital mar-

ket (55 billions USD, according to average guess). This can bring either a sharp increase in real interest rate (1 to 3 points, according to an American institute) or make the Third World unable to borrow, which will lead to a decline in its investment capacity (a decline of 0.8 to 2, 3 per cent of the ratio of investment to GDP is predicted by some researchers).

Trade will also be a field of stronger competition between East European countries which, compared to West Europe, have low wages, tradition of technology and productivity and a growing access to industrialised countries' markets for political reason, and Third World countries.

Third World Relationship

The new world order is a challenge for every country, European or not. This challenge has some very positive aspects for developing countries like Bangladesh:

The fate of Europe is interlocked with the overall situation in the world and, for a full range of reasons, humanitarian or more selfish reasons, Europe has a genuine interest in preventing the widening of the gap between rich and poor in the world. Public opinion is now more aware in

Europe than before that something significant must be done for the least developed areas of the planet. At the same time, requirement for more efforts and results on the receiving side to be sure of the effectiveness of their assistance is now asserted more clearly.

Building of Europe and improvement of climate for investments will enhance more growth and make it easier to defuse social and international tensions. The conversion of military plants to civil units, even on a limited scale, will change patterns of investment to more productive means for consumption.

With its positive and negative aspects, the new world order is a tremendous challenge for the Third World.

Of course, skill of diplomats is necessary to express correctly the LDCs' views and to obtain from the industrialised countries concessions to prevent the widening of the dangerous gap between developed and developing countries.

But, above all, to obtain benefits from the present evolution, Third World countries need to react properly and timely according to the following lines of action:

— developing countries cannot stay isolated and unchanged when the world is moving so fast. In fact, they are not. India is shifting dramatically her economic policy by granting a leading role to market forces, implementing stronger financial discipline and opening up her economy to foreign investments.

— the social cost of the transition period is undoubtedly high and a national consensus is highly desirable. Ways and means can differ from one country to another but democracy as well as an able and well-accepted executive power seem to be the best ingredients for a successful transition.

To be concluded tomorrow.

The author is Ambassador of France in Bangladesh.

Clampdown on Casinos Sparks a Keen Debate

Harold Pieris writes from Colombo

Political and economic considerations, as well as social and ethical ones, lie behind Sri Lankan President Premadasa's sudden and dramatic closure of gambling casinos

CASINOS and jackpot machines have again been summarily banned in Sri Lanka, after failing to entice the tourists and foreign currency which dwindled when violence erupted in the country in the early 1980.

A four-year gambling indulgence ended in June when President Premadasa used emergency powers to reverse the 1987 decision of his United National Party government — under his predecessor Junius Jayewardene — to allow casinos to operate. The sudden clampdown has sparked fresh controversy on this form of gambling, which was first banned three decades ago.

As soon as the move was announced, police raided and closed down all the casinos, some of them in five-star hotels and seized their equipment. They took away more than 4,000 jackpot machines, some of which were crushed at the State Steel Corporation mills. The machines have been valued at about Rs 100,000 (US\$2,500) each.

The reason for the immediate swoop was that if casino

and jackpot operators had been given time to wind up their operations, as they requested, they might have gone underground and continued in business.

Aside from the failure of the gambling experiment as a foreign exchange earner, President Premadasa had taken account of its moral and social repercussions — including the involvement of organised crime, drug smuggling and large-scale prostitution.

In acting quickly and decisively, Mr Premadasa has sought to take the wind out of the sails of the opposition parties which, along with religious organisations, have been vocally critical of his alleged toleration of gambling. In the 1988 presidential election his principal opponent, Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike, vehemently attacked the UNP on this score.

It was in 1961 that Mrs Bandaranaike, then Prime Minister, first banned the importation into the country of any equipment for playing games of chance. When President Jayewardene lifted the ban in 1977, his main motive was to help those tourist hotels which were losing business because of the insurgency; he also took the view that you cannot morally reform people — or corrupt them — through legislation.

The issue surfaced again in February this year with the deportation from Sri Lanka of the "Asian Casino King," Joe Sim — or Sim Ho Yie. Soon afterwards, when Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne was killed in a bomb explosion in Colombo, there was speculation that the assassination might have been the work of a gambling mafia.

President Premadasa has clamped down on the casinos

even before receiving the formal report of a sub-committee which he appointed to look into the matter. A majority of this committee conclude that casinos should not be banned altogether but confined strictly to five-star hotels and patronage by foreigners only.

The President evidently felt that a partial ban would be too difficult to implement. There have been complaints that more and more locals were frequenting the casinos.

Casino owners who invested in gambling equipment and machines not surprisingly feel aggrieved at having lost their business overnight. But there is some prospect of compensation for those who legally imported the machines and who can prove this with proper documentation.

The government, too, stands to lose revenue amounting to about Rs 70 mil-

lion (US\$1.75 million) annually from licensing fees and taxes on turnover. But there are doubts as to whether the state would have collected anything like the full sums owed. Tax evasion in this field is alleged to be widespread.

To evolve a consistent policy, the government may now have to examine other forms of gambling, heeding public fears of a general deterioration of morals. School principals have complained that students are falling prey to a "jackpot addiction."

In recent years betting has proliferated in the country on horse races run overseas. A ban on the publication of racing news was imposed by the first Bandaranaike government in the late 1950s. It failed largely to deter "underground" betting operations and was lifted in the 1980s.

State lotteries have also

come under fire. These were first introduced some thirty years ago as "hospital sweeps", with the proceeds going to the improvement of state hospitals. Since then various forms of State Development Lotteries have been instituted — with large sums, or cars, offered as prizes.

In some areas a "good cause" can be cited as a defence; in others, personal gain seems to be the sole motivation. Many people feel that a comprehensive review is now necessary to work out a clear and generally acceptable policy.

Manifestly, while man's urge to "have a flutter" is alive and well and widespread in Sri Lanka, there is also a lively groundswell of popular disapproval and anxiety over games of chance.

Against this background, and in retrospect, it is easy to see the four-year experiment with casinos as what it was: a gamble in itself — and a gamble that failed to pay off, either financially or politically.

— Dept. News Asia

Africa

Learning the Mengistu Lesson

The downfall of Ethiopian strongman Mengistu Haile Mariam serves as a lesson to other African leaders with the same penchant for wanting to rule indefinitely, academic and church leaders say. Horace Awori of IPS reports from Nairobi

the time they left office.

Mengistu is of the mould that just doesn't let go, said Adejeji. The former army colonel rose to power in 1977, three years after the armed forces overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie.

Mengistu's three predecessors at the helm of the Armed Forces Coordination Committee or the 'Dergue' were shot dead. He survived by ruling with an iron fist.

To consolidate power, Mengistu backed the Revolutionary Front, a group of officers and civilians which had studied in Eastern Europe and were loyal to the Dergue.

With Soviet and Cuban help, Mengistu momentarily quelled the separatist rebellions in Eritrea and the Ogaden Desert. By the early 1980s, his government seemed firmly in control. But in 1984, drought devastated Ethiopia and killed thousands through starvation and disease. Mengistu's political fortunes declined rapidly.

Meanwhile, as the leftwing separatists regained ground, the socialist regime of Mengistu opted to fight rather than talk. That policy produced a disaster when in December 1987, the Ethiopian army suffered a crushing defeat in which 18,000 govern-

ment troops and three Soviet advisers were taken prisoners. A disgruntled army faction attempted a coup in May 1989, but Mengistu crushed that rebellion and executed dozens of senior officers. That left his armed forces in the hands of inexperienced officers to the delight of the rebels. Mengistu has left Ethiopia in tatters, its population famine-stricken and its political and social fabric unravelling.

Ethiopia's agony, the latest of many in the African continent, has sharpened the desire to build more stable and democratic political institutions.

"African leaders are the laughingstock of the world," says Rev. Stephen Ambani of the Church of Kenya.

"They cling to power even when it is appropriate that they should quit," he said.

The Catholic Church here issued a statement warning Kenyans that though their country was relatively peaceful and stable, it was not immune to the civil strife affecting its neighbours.

Bishop John Njue, chairman of the church's Justice and Peace Commission, urged Kenyan leaders to open up the political system by banning detention without trial, torture,

and intimidation of dissenters. "Charity begins at home," said Njue. "Nobody who fled this country due to political harassment would dare return while the political climate has not improved a iota."

The notion that democracy is compatible with a one-party system is increasingly being challenged in Kenya and other countries in Africa.

A Nairobi professor, who asked not to be named, told IPS the rigid political systems prevailing in many African countries have "stifled innovations in the management of national affairs."

Critics say the one-party system results in an inefficient and corrupt civil service and muzzled press.

As the arguments presented at the Kampala meeting indicate, many Africans would like to see an end to the situation where leaders end up sitting in state mansions indefinitely. That is, until they are killed, as was Liberia's Samuel Doe, or forced to flee, as Mengistu Haile Mariam did.

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.

PDB system loss

Sir, I endorse the view expressed by Quazi Akhlaque-uz-Azcm in his letter captioned 'PDB arrears bills' published in your daily on July 26. I want to add a few lines.

The so-called 'system loss' of 42% is, to a greater extent, nothing but pilferage done by some unscrupulous members

of the public in probable connivance with some PDB personnel. This is an open secret, but none may be held directly responsible for this pilferage because the production and marketing is being done by the same authority. And as such we as layman cannot say who are actually responsible for the so high a rate of 'system loss' in the world. However, I want to

make the following proposals:

(1) Separate the production side from the marketing side. The production side will produce required amount of electricity and will realize the amount from the marketing side. Then it will be the responsibility of the marketing department to realize the money from their customers.

(2) The authority concerned must sack the Executive Engineer of the commercial operation of PDB, if he fails to disconnect the defaulter's line within one year of the default.

(3) The claim of PDB be made time barred after 3 years and the PDB personnel responsible for the time barred

case be suitably taken to task.

(4) Regional electric meters be installed to identify the area/locality of high pilferage.

(5) Area-wise small generators of 10MWS in place of 200 or 250 MWS may be installed.

(6) Person or persons be rewarded for giving information about the pilferage or leading to the detection of pilferage.

(7) Service oriented organizations like WASA, T&T and Electric Supply may be turned into limited companies.

These are a few steps that may help in reducing the so-called system loss.

M. Saleem Ullah
Motjheel C/A, Dhaka.

Foreign films on TV

Sir, Our TV has been showing a number of "thrillers" and "adventure" films in English which are the main object or "theme" is to prove that "all crimes are at last punished" and "good shall prevail upon evil".

Unfortunately the noble "theme" in English language is not generally followed or understood by the vast majority of our growing children and the illiterate/semi-literate mass. Because of this communication gap in language, sometimes the effect is just opposite — children, both in the cities, and villages only view actions of gun battles,

burglar's techniques, explosive uses etc. This audience is seldom educated about the philosophy of "crime and punishment". Had these films been shown 'dubbed' in our national Bengali language, as in many of the foreign countries like Egypt, Malaysia, Iran etc., the noble themes there would have effected moral build-up among our children and simple illiterate masses — who are really our most important people of future.

The Information Ministry or the BTV authorities may therefore start 'dubbing' the dialogues in Bengali of all such action thrillers without delay to the benefit of the nation.

A well-wisher citizen