

Mission to India

Over the coming months and years, exchanges of visits between foreign ministers of India and Bangladesh should become very much routine matters, useful diplomatic exercises but not necessarily concerned with solving pressing problems. In this process, the four day visit to India of Foreign Minister A S M Mustafizur Rahman who leaves for New Delhi today should make a good start.

As the visit provides the first political level contact between the two newly-elected governments in Dhaka and Delhi, the significance of the Mustafiz Mission cannot be over-emphasised. Here is an opportunity for Mr Rahman to explain to his counterpart Madhav Singh Solanki and, indeed, to the Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao the basic approach of the government of Begum Khaleda Zia to the country's foreign relations, especially where they concern our immediate neighbour, India. The due emphasis on the continuity of the foreign policy of Bangladesh will be there. However, instead of appearing to be a prisoner of the past, the approach of the new administration should be viewed as one reflecting a new thrust, a new dynamism and a new style. Indeed, wherever possible, there should be changes in substance in some carefully identified areas of the country's foreign policy, not excluding the Indo-Bangladesh relations.

Even at its present evolving stage, the new approach will be put to some kind of a test when the two sides take up a number of outstanding issues which call for urgent solutions. One such issue whose final resolution has been delayed too long is the handing over of the Tin Bigha Corridor by the Indian authorities to Bangladesh. Since, it is said, that New Delhi has set in motion the formalities for payment of compensation to Indians who own land in the affected area, there are no obstacles hindering almost an immediate transfer. The forthcoming ministerial meeting in New Delhi should, therefore, be able to set the date and work out the modalities for the change-over.

In terms of importance, the discussion on the sharing of the water through the Farakka would be of immediate concern to Bangladesh, in view of the approach of the dry season. On this issue which had been virtually pushed under the carpet, through sheer and probably deliberate inaction by the Ershad regime, Bangladesh should now seek the revival of the 1977 Agreement that provides for a guaranteed minimum share of water to this country, during the dry season. Other items on the agenda pose no challenges, but they call for patient discussions at the official level. For one thing, now that Chakmas in the Chittagong Hill Tracts have joined the mainstream politics by electing three members — incidentally all from Awami League — to the parliament, efforts should be stepped up for the return of Chakma refugees from the Indian sanctuaries. It is high time we closed this unpleasant chapter in the Delhi-Dhaka bilateral relations.

On all this issues, the Bangladesh delegation should return to Dhaka with a measure of success. However, for the Mustafiz Mission, what may be more important is to help in creating a new climate in Indo-Bangladesh relations, a climate in which openness and candour provide the basis for our future bilateral and even regional relations. Secrecy and diplomacy are not necessarily synonymous and, in bilateral relations, neither side should take the other for granted. However, in our view, efforts to create a new healthy mood in our relations should involve a cross-section of opinion-makers in the two countries — politicians of all ranks, parliamentarians, academicians, opinion lobbies, the business community and, most certainly, the media. It is hoped that Foreign Minister Rahman, an affable open-minded politician, will discuss with his Indian counterpart how the two governments can help in creating this new climate. He can thus turn a trip to New Delhi into a mission to India.

Strong Case for Rural Telephones

It is not surprising that per person usage of telephone in Bangladesh is among the lowest in the world. What, however, is surprising that we still have not been able to grasp the critical importance of this modern day invention in the economic growth of a developing country like ours. According to an official of the Telephone Shilpa Sangstha (TSS), country-wide only 1.3 persons per thousand have access to telephone. The figure changes to 1 person per 3,300 for some remote areas. Days are long gone when telephone might have been considered a luxury or of special use for only the rich and the powerful. Today it is an indispensable tool for trade and commerce and is a basic necessity for almost every aspect of our social life. Starting from administrative needs to that of maintaining law and order and extending to the need for regulating supply and demand, the telephone is of utmost importance.

The advantage of a country like Bangladesh is that area-wise it is relatively small and the terrain is, for the most part, flat rendering it to easily installable telecommunication system. Given the further fact that our road and railway communication is far from having reached every nook and corner of the country, a reliable telecommunication system, therefore, may be the most cost effective way of keeping the linkage among all parts of the country all the year round.

The crucial question that remains is how to fund such a massive expansion of telecommunication in the rural areas. As statistics have shown again and again that return per unit — in economic terms — of investment for telephones in the rural areas have been found to be far more than for a similar investment in the urban areas. According to the same TSS official, impact of investment in telecommunication in the low income rural areas have been found to be far greater than previously supposed.

These and similar other findings make a strong case for a new look into the possibility of further expansion of the telecommunication system in the rural areas. It is quite possible the positive impact on the trade and commerce in the outlying areas and the consequent improved linkages with the commercial centres of the country will sufficiently improve the rural economy for our villagers to enable them to pay for the services which will no doubt have a profound impact on their lives.

The fact is strong and clear enough for our planners to give it a serious consideration.

HERE is nothing wrong to be complacent about one's victory in bringing down an autocratic regime and returning the people their lost dignity, freedom and democracy but that one can afford to remain indifferent to and unconcerned about what is happening nearer home. Burma is bleeding white fighting a brute junta called State Law and Order Restoration Committee (SLORC) for similar causes as ours: human dignity, freedom and democracy instilled in their heart of the people by the 'daughter of the East' Suu Kyt.

Suu Kyt is the only child of the founder of the Burmese National Army and the hero of the Burma's freedom struggle Aung San, slain in 1947 at the age of 32 when Suu Kyt was only two years old. She gave her people a 'mantra' like Gandhi's 'ahimsa' — absence of fear from mind, in her own way. She says, "It is not power that corrupts, but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it; and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those that are subjected to it". And so, "even under the most crushing state machinery courage rises up again and again for fear is not the natural state of civilised mind." With such 'mantra' she called her people to rise up against the junta for achieving their lost dignity, freedom and democracy. They responded and came out in millions under the banner of the National League for Democracy (NLD) which won 82% of the seats contested in the elections held in May 27, 1990. The junta did not hand over power to the elected representatives of the Burmese people and imprisoned Suu Kyt for a period of three years in July 1989. What a striking similarity with the post-election scenario of Bangladesh!

Recently we read in the pages of our national dailies that the term of Suu has been extended to five years by

changing the law under which she was detained. She has already served two years of her 3-year term in solitary confinement during which she was denied any contact with her husband and two sons. While her two sons deprived of their mother's love, and husband along with her friends around the world have been waiting for her release in about a year's time, the brute junta has served her with fresh order. They did it because they were earlier unsuccessful to persuade Suu to buy her freedom by leaving the country and her people. She rejected the

When Suu Kyt is languishing in her solitary confinement and when her people are constantly being oppressed under the SLORC and even when her internment term has been unlawfully extended to five years, our leaders who led us in our struggle against the autocratic regime, have failed to condemn the crimes of the dictatorship of Burma against her people, against democracy and human rights.

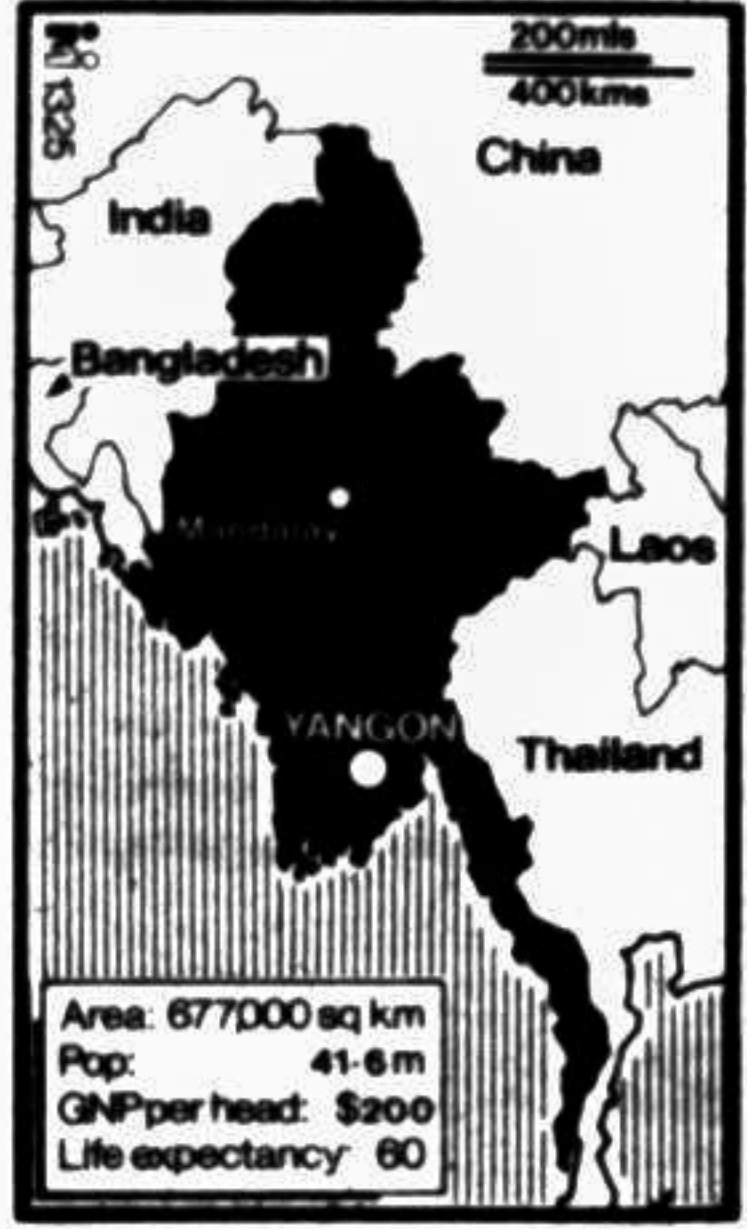
offer and preferred to share suffering of her people who elected her their leader in 1988. The abrupt change in the detention law by the junta is probably aimed at slowly killing her in her solitary confinement.

Only a month ago, July 10, 1991 to be precise, the European Parliament honoured the 'daughter of the East' with the prestigious



Aung San Suu Kyt

freedom to which men aspire that their lives might be full and unimpeded, freedom from fear stands out as both a means and an end. A people who would build a nation in which strong democratic institutions are firmly established as a guarantee against state in-



Area: 677,000 sq km Pop: 41.6m GNP per head: \$200 Life expectancy: 60

duced power must first learn to liberate their own minds from apathy and fear." In this passage don't we hear the voice of Gandhiji when she quotes Jawaharlal Nehru "abhaya — fearlessness, not merely bodily courage but absence of fear from the mind."

When Suu Kyt is languishing in her solitary confinement and when her people are constantly being oppressed under the SLORC and even when her internment term has been unlawfully extended to five years our leaders who lead us in our

struggle against the autocratic regime, (in spite of the touching editorial in The Daily Star captioned — "Burma — time to wake up"), have unfortunately failed to condemn the crimes of the military dictatorship of Burma against her people, against democracy and the human rights. One of our two celebrated leaders in our struggle for democracy is the Prime Minister and the other is the Leader of the Opposition in the Jatiya Sangsad, Suu Kyt, who has been deprived of all basic human rights and freedom will probably be of the age of our two leaders. It is difficult to believe that our leaders are not aware of what is going on in Burma. It is equally difficult to believe that Peace Council of Bangladesh and the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) did not know about the happenings in Burma. Why then none deemed it necessary to express sympathy and solidarity with Burmese people? Probably they strongly believe in 'noninterference in internal af-

airs of other countries' — which the SLORC would make the world believe. It is sad that even the students and the youth who played the role of vanguards in our struggle for democracy only the other day also remained unconcerned and indifferent while their compatriots, students and youths of their age are hacked to death, imprisoned and forced to go to the hills simply because, they also took to the streets of Rangoon and other cities of Burma for democracy, dignity and human rights.

Whereas in the sixties and even in the seventies students here raised their voice against all kinds of oppression; against the military dictatorship anywhere in the world. They brought out huge processions in the streets of Dhaka to express solidarity with the struggling people of Asia, Africa and Latin America especially, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Chile.

One sadly has to muse how time has changed, values have changed, attitudes have changed. How nonchalant could we remain on the affairs of our next door neighbour. Even our print media except The Daily Star did not bother to take a look into the affairs of Burma let alone condemn the activities of the SLORC.

During our War of Liberation we always wanted the support and sympathy of all the democratic and peace-loving peoples around the world. And we received it pro-

fully. When Bahabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was imprisoned on March 25, 1971, democratic forces around the world raised their voice against it and demanded his release and safety. Parliament members, Senators across the globe demanded the Soviet Union in the name of the Supreme Soviet demanded his safety and asked Yahia Khan to hand over power to the elected representatives. The role of the people of India, their Parliament and above all the role of their Prime Minister Indira Gandhi are still fresh in the memories of all the Bengalees. Nobody then was prepared to accept the situation as the internal affairs of Pakistan because it would have been hypocritical.

I thought I should know the bare fact that if military dictatorship is allowed to rule the neighbouring country, democracy in our own country may not be very safe. At times undesirable action of an aspiring military ruler might jeopardise and endanger any fragile and fledgling democracy. One can see the reason for the silence of the past autocratic government on the state of affairs in Burma but one can hardly find an explanation as to the 'lack of interest' of our present democratic government in the 'sufferings' of the Burmese people.

We wish to hope that our government, the opposition political parties and the parliament would no longer remain silent and would raise their voices severally and collectively for the release of Suu and transfer of power to the elected representatives and at the same time would urge all the democratic forces of the world to put pressure on the military dictatorship of Burma. After all Third World countries would have to stand by each other for democracy, peace and freedom, otherwise we shall all become victims of the so-called new political order 'unipolarity'.

Vietnam

AIDS Spawns New Interest in Social Work

by Tony Kahane

NEUYEN Thi Oanh is a 69 year-old retired social worker in Ho Chi Minh City who is going back to work to help the Vietnamese deal with AIDS.

Social work became a thing of the past when the puritanical mix of Confucianism and Marxism swept down from North Vietnam to the south in 1975. Social problems were henceforth to be solved by exhortation and moralising.

Former prostitutes and drug addicts, for instance, were sent to schools for rehabilitation and the social problems their existence might have implied were considered abolished.

Oanh's social work was thus swept aside. But a few years ago, she personally encountered two people with AIDS, a disease that is bringing change to Vietnam. That encounter was the reason for her return to social work.

Oanh has been asked to give classes to medical staff and prospective health counsellors.

The struggle against AIDS in Vietnam is encouraging a resurgence in social work, an activity which had been swept aside by a reforming puritanism during the long war. Workers who once dealt with social problems in what used to be called Saigon, found themselves out of place in the new Ho Chi Minh City. But some of them are now coming out of retirement.

She believes they are currently not equipped to deal with the problems of AIDS. "Most of the authorities have no understanding of human psychology. All they can do is moralise," she said.

Both she and Dr Do Hong Ngoc, director of one of the city's 11 health information and education centres, want to bring in social workers from abroad. They are looking for people skilled in health and AIDS counselling to train Vietnamese for the job.

In the city of four million people, counselling is done mainly over the telephone from seven medical centres. The corridor leading to Dr

Ngoc's office reflects different approaches to AIDS among authorities and doctors in Vietnam. On one board their is a display of AIDS leaflets distributed by the Health Education and Information Centre.

A number of these leaflets are stuck together to spell out the world SIDA, the French acronym for AIDS. The English AIDS is too awkward for most Vietnamese, while the Vietnamese acronym is too clumsy.

The Vietnamese leaflet talks clearly about the need for condoms, for needles and syringes to be sterilised and for blood used in transfusions to be screened for the HIV virus. "You can't get AIDS by sharing

chopsticks," it says.

But this open and direct attitude is in sharp contrast to the posters produced by city authorities. One is an old-fashioned image of a married couple, explaining that fidelity will ensure that one does not contract the HIV virus. Another, with crude illustrations of a drug user and a shady prostitute, states that prostitutes and drug users are the source of AIDS.

Vietnam has responded more quickly to AIDS than its neighbour Thailand, which has considerably greater exposure to the outside world and therefore has a much more evidence of the spread of HIV.

While officially only one case of HIV has been determined in Vietnam so far, testing for the virus began some four years ago.

A recent AIDS conference in Florence, Italy warned of a likely explosion of AIDS cases over the next decade in Asia, the last region of the world to be significantly affected.

Ho Chi Minh City, in contrast to its former identity as the racy Saigon which served the US army during the Vietnam war, has become a rather innocent place.

Things are changing fast, however. As the country begins to welcome outside economic interest, the city is now bal-

anced between innocent serenity and wilder vibrancy. Visiting business people and an increase in tourism over the last two years, along with endemic poverty, have caused an increase in prostitution.

Vietnam also has poor facilities for sterilising medical equipment and screening blood. Spread of the disease among intravenous drug users sharing contaminated needles is not considered a major problem, despite a rise in heroin use.

HIV testing has been going on since 1987 in Ho Chi Minh City. Some 30,000 high risk people have so far been tested even though the country cannot afford the most modern methods of testing. If a test proves positive, a sample is then flown to France for confirmation using the Western blot test. — GEMINI NEWS

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Cambodia: The Prince Returns

Whether the Khmer Rouge likes it or not, the next stop in Prince Norodom Sihanouk's long and winding road to peace is Phnom Penh. Tom Fawthrop reports from Bangkok.

tion," said an Indian diplomat who was formerly charge d'affaires in Phnom Penh.

"Sihanouk provides international legitimacy, Hun Sen is the dynamic leader of a functioning administration," the diplomat added.

Chea Sim, the president of the Cambodian parliament who ranks senior to Hun Sen in the Phnom Penh hierarchy, has made it clear both he and Hun Sen see a coalition with Sihanouk as the anchor of a political settlement.

"We begged Prince Sihanouk many times to abandon the Khmer Rouge," Chea Sim told IIPS during a recent trip to Paris. "We want to make an alliance with him."

Sihanouk is allied with Pol Pot's communist Khmer Rouge and the non-communist Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) of Son Sann in the tripartite anti-Phnom Penh coalition.

Sihanouk chaired last

week's extraordinary session of the Supreme National Council (SNC) — Cambodia's proposed interim coalition government — which ended with agreements on a prolonged ceasefire and an arms moratorium.

Up till then, the two warring sides had scarcely managed to agree on who should chair the meetings, much less the agenda.

The main point of disagreement has been Phnom Penh's insistence that a peace plan include a guarantee against the Khmer Rouge returning to power. The Khmer Rouge are held responsible for the killing of about a million Cambodians during their four-

year rule.

Suddenly, in only three days in the Thai seaside resort of Pattaya, Sihanouk succeeded in getting all parties in the coalition to sign a record number of agreements.

Sihanouk proclaimed that the SNC would become a "super-government" to be set up eventually in the Cambodian capital. Whatever the face-saving terminology, it means that the non-communist factions led by Sihanouk have effectively dropped their previous demand for the dismantling of the Vietnamese-installed Phnom Penh regime.

Cambodia-watchers bewildered by the unexpected turn of events were left wondering

about the new forces at work that had unlocked the peace process.

They say the Cambodian government must be feeling much more confident because of its recent military successes. In April, a Phnom Penh counter-offensive had routed Pol Pot's battalions and captured a vast arsenal of Chinese firepower.

Sihanouk who only last year was admiring the military prowess of the Khmer Rouge is now more inclined to keep his options open.

The new factor forcing the hand of the usually recalcitrant Khmer Rouge is almost certainly Sihanouk's determination to go back to Phnom Penh.

China appears to have pressured the Khmer Rouge, militarily the strongest of the anti-Phnom Penh factions, to support Sihanouk rather than risk total isolation in the peace process.

To the Editor...

An appeal to the Mayor

Sir, The city Mayor's esteemed position has the responsibilities ranging from ensuring sanitation and cleanliness of the city to the highly honourable job of presenting the key of the city to the visiting heads of the state. While the later one is a pleasant job, the first one is undoubtedly a trying task for anyone. This is precisely the area where I would like to draw his kind attention.

The cleanliness aspect of the city has gone from bad to

worse. I am a resident of Mugh Bazar, a thickly populated area and becoming more so, on the one hand by the number of high-rise buildings and on the other, by the ever increasing number of "Bustec" people in the area. If you ever happen to pass through Mugh Bazar New Eskaton area, you would see what an unhygienic atmosphere prevails there. Heaps of garbage, overflowing dustbins on the pavements are a common sight which remain uncleared for days together polluting the entire atmosphere of the locality. Almost close to this are the new road linking the Dhaka-Tongi Diversion

road with Hotel Sonargaon which again presents a nauseating sight. "Bustecs" have sprang up on both sides of the road polluting the so called lake behind the 5-star hotel and presenting a horrifying picture of city's sanitation and city corporation's performance. A little further ahead is the newly built park and a fountain (west of Sonargaon Hotel). The water hydrants there are used for open air bathing, cloth washing and the park itself for sundrying of clothes. Cross "Panthapath", enter Green Road and turn left. As you proceed you will smell the prevailing atmo-

sphere there. Can't the city corporation do something about it? If this is the condition of the roads in the new city areas, one can imagine the conditions of the old city. Sweeping of the roads have become a thing of the past.

In olden days we have seen in Calcutta, Corporation workers used to clean the city streets, remove all garbage before sun rise. I do not know if Calcutta Corporation still maintains that much of efficiency.

"Old habits die hard". Therefore, nothing can be achieved overnight we know it.

But a start has to be made at some point. Ward Commissioners we believe, can play a great part if they want to, in salvaging the situation, educating the people in their respective areas, arranging minimum health and sanitation care in the locality with the assistance of the City Corporation as well as with local help and contributions. This is not a very gigantic task but what is required is the will and initiative to do the work. Had they looked after their locality, organized things and sought the assistance of the local people, there would have been a different story to tell.

The Mayor's personal periodic visits to city areas including pulling up of the concerned officials will, I am sure, help improve things considerably.

The conditions of city roads and the environmental hazards are growing due to the inaction of DMC officials. We want to see you actions, and are in no mood to listen to speeches on future plans and programmes which finally end up in paper work.

A resident Mughbazar, Dhaka.