## No Substitute for Efficiency

With imposition of Value Added Tax, most types of printing papers, except newsprint and white paper, have registered a four per cent rise. According to a report published in this paper Monday, due to the comparatively low price being offered for imported papers by wholesale traders at Nayabazar paper market, local products have become uncompetitive and are on the verge of being driven out of the market altogether.

Offset papers produced by the Karnaphuli mill of the Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation have already become scarce in the market and products of Sonali Papers and Board Mills are not doing much better either. Products from Korea and China are making major inroads, while Indian and Malaysian producers are also entering the market.

It is an obviously distressing situation. However, any call for ban on imports may appear to be an easy way out, but it may also be detrimental to the long-term growth of the industry in this country.

Blame for the prevailing situation should not be heaped on the importers alone, and local paper producers must be prepared to accept the major share of the responsibility. After all, it is their product, produced locally with cheap local labour, that is failing to make its impact on the market. so they must ask themselves what they have to do to make their products competitive.

For years, local producers of quality papers enjoyed protection under a government ban on imports. During those years, pricing of their products, judging by comments of consumers, was little better than arbitrary. Not much attention was paid to increase efficiency, lower costs or improve quality during the years of monopoly control of the market. It was only a matter of time before foreign products, which were kept beyond the reach of consumers through high taxation, managed to penetrate the big market existing below the artificially-high price charged by local producers.

While we move towards a more open economy with lowered import duties, the pressure is naturally increasing on local industry to survive against foreign competition. This was always foreseeable, but for some unknown reason nothing was done to prepare for it. It is rather ironic that while we are trying to attract foreign companies to come and invest in Bangladesh and set up export-oriented enterprises, our own manufacturers are finding it difficult to hold their in the domestic market. If foreign

companies can utilise cheap labour offered by Bangladesh and produce internationallycompetitive products, then why is it not possible for Bangladeshi companies to defeat foreign competition in the home market?

The answer may well be found in one word efficiency. The state of the paper industry should serve as a warning to all others that there is no substitute for efficiency.

It is certainly hoped that import-duty relaxation of recent years will have the singular effect of forcing our industrial managers and workers to put the greatest emphasis on lowering costs and improving quality. Otherwise, the process of industrialisation may be retarded for decades to come.

## Making Bricks out of Trees

There is alarming news from Dinajpur. Highways connecting the town with Setabganj, Phulbari, Thakurgaon and Khanpur are being denuded of precious fruit-bearing and timber yielding trees. A wealth of kings is cut down and the Shal, Segun, Mahogany, Garjan, Babla that made up a most soulfilling landscape are being carried off to fire the 75 kilns of the local brickfields. This is happening in flagrant violation of a 1989 government ban on using trees as fuel in the brickfields. The Daily Star report on the situation, published on Monday, alleges that this is being done by the brickfield owners although coal depots are within reach and have a good stock.

This is dangerous. This also is tragic as Bangladesh, in the absence of finding a way to stop the receding forest line, has been left with the waysides for keeping and if possible augmenting the population of trees that must be there for the physical survival of the land and its people. And the wayside greenery has time and again been proving as vulnerable, if not more, to the axe of the tree-poacher, who may, in all likelihood, be the strong man in the area and not at all a sneaking thief.

Of the most celebrated treelined highways of the nation, namely the Jessore Road, the Pabna-Rajshahi Road, the Rajshahi-Ishurdi Road, the Muktagachha-Mymensingh Road etc nearly all have suffered mindless depredations. But the Jessore Road perhaps wears the most pathetic look of all. Why? Because of the tobacco connection, - tobacco growers needed wood to semiprocess the leaves before they could hope to sell them to a multinational.

Brickfield owners and tobacco lords can be disciplined if only because they are supremely apprehendable because of their open business and industry. If the government has the right will these and other big-time consumers of trees as fuel can be made to give up the practice under pain of losing their enterprises. The problem now is one of the government having the right will to restrain them.

There is another aspect to the problem that would not be as easily amenable. There must be at least 20 million domestic stoves and cookers -'chula's to be plain — that must be fed with firewood at least twice a day. Bangladesh, as things are, is hardly in a position to cope with that need of burning at least 10,000 tons of plants only to boil its dish of rice. An effective way must be found to cut on this and, side by side, to bolster our green-life population so that we can take on the challenge of such demand.

### A UNION UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

come about.

# We're Together, Now What do We Do?

Allan Thompson writes from Marrakesh

Regional groupings are in vogue. Mainly they have formed because of external economic

pressures. The front-runner, the European Community, came into being in the Fifties to

create a powerful European unit. Others followed in Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean

and the Pacific and lately in North America. An all-Africa common market is planned, but

in the meantime five North African countries, disturbed by the economic power of the

European Community, have formed a union — the Arab Maghreb Union. Now more than

hreb Union (AMU) formed two years ago by Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania has brought peace between the perennially quarrelsome countries of North Africa, it has so far produced more paper than

prosperity. In response to the prospect of a united Europe, Maghreb leaders have committed themselves to gradual economic integration leading to a customs union by 1995 and a common market in 2000. That would mean co-operation at all levels and free movement of goods and people across borders.

But despite a near-constant swirl of summits, ministerial meetings and specialised committees, there have been few real results as the third anniversary of the Union, approaches.

Critics blame it on a lack of political will and accuse Maghrebi leaders of talking out of both sides of their mouths spouting the truisms of union when it suits them, but stubbornly refusing to give up any sovereignty.

Said Tunisian economist Abdel Jelil Bedoui: "So far there is no concrete project at the multilateral level with definite objectives, means to realise it or a timetable."

Others point to the legal and technical groundwork done and say it is too early to judge the union formed in Marrakesh in February, 1989. And they say the very fact AMU exists is something of an accomplishment.

Marrakesh created a sixmonth rotating presidency with a floating secretariat that follows along. The Maghreb Court rules on disputes. A council of foreign ministers paves the way for summits of heads of state and four specialised commissions study proposals on all aspects of integration.

Those proposals eventually wind their way through follow up committees and a parliament-like council (Shura), then come to the heads of state at the presidential council for approval. It sounds like an exercise in shuffling paper and to a certain degree it is.

A proposal for a Maghreb Identification Card to allow free movement across borders has been awaiting presidential council approval more than a year. The deadline for a customs union is four years away with little sign how it will

N Sri Lanka, children s tep on mines laid by terrorists and lose their

legs, if not their lives. Children have been displaced, orphaned and injured in the armed conflict. Now, they are also being recruited by Tamil terrorists as combatants, with boys as young as 12

deployed in action. With adult househelps leaving to work for higher-paying households in the Middle East, more children are being pushed to become servants in Sri Lankan homes, where they can be severely exploited. As many as 500,000 youngsters are believed to be in domestic

The suffering among children has prompted a number/ of professionals to band together into an advocacy group called the National Children's Foundation (NCF).

There are already many organisations serving children's needs. But the new group feels it has a role to play - at the level of policy-making, lawmaking and enforcement — to safeguard the rights of children, especially the poor and the disabled.

Bradman Weerakoon, a leading NCF member and adviser to the President on international affairs, said the Foundation will urge authorities to update and enforce laws relating to children, especially since Sri Lanka has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Although small, the group

· new highways and security of investments — it will be a real

two years old, little has been heard of its progress.

There have been small successes: a Maghreb-wide vaccination policy and a new programme to let children living near frontiers cross the border to school if it is more conve-

Union proponents glow with proclamations about the march to Maghrebi construction while the harshest critics say the Union is at an impasse. The reality is in between. Something is happening. On

any given day, somewhere in the Maghreb, there will be a meeting to work out such things as common veterinary policy, cinema production, a joint airline or postal service. Indeed if the list of accords

given lip service by the heads of state ever come into place including ones on free move ment of farm products, a pan-Maghreb high-speed train.

Maaoulya Ould Sid Ahmed Taya

Area: 1.03 million sq.km

Debt: \$2.25 billion (1989)

GDP: \$910 billion (1988)

\$960 per capita

ARAB MAGHREB

NOINU

aayoune

Head of state:

Pop: 2.02 million

**Western Sahara** 

Mostly occupied by

Morocco since 1976

Saharan Democratic

declared by Polisario 1976

recognised by 73 states

Arab Republic

Area:280,000 km2

Pop: 170,000

Polisario leader:

Mohammed Abdelaziz

Life expectancy: 47

Independence: 1960

achievement.

But it is taking too long. "It is too early to judge, we've spent these two years getting to know each other," said Moroccan Maghreb Affairs

Minister Abdussalam Barakat. Added his Tunisian counterpart, Hamadi Khouini: "We go slowly but surely because we had bad experiences in the Arab world of unions that were stillborn."

One problem is the nomadic nature of the Maghreb Union bodies. They move about the region like travelling salesmen. Creating a permanent secretariat has been discussed since day one, but so far the heads of state cannot agree where it should be.

Tunisia hoped it could use the monstrous edifice built to house the Arab League (now

Head of state:

Area: 446,550 sq.km

Pop: 25.14 million

Life expectancy: 62

Independence: 1956

Created by Marrakesh Treaty,

Total population: 65 million

Total foreign debt: \$62 billion

Total area: 6 million sq.km

Total GDP: \$107 billion

N GETT

17 Febuary 1989

Debt: \$22 billion (1989)

GDP: \$22 billion (1988)

\$2,380 per capita

Hassan II

gone back to Cairo), to make Tunis into the Brussels of the Maghreb. No luck. Now Morocco is bidding for Rabat.

The dispute is indicative of a deeper problem, familiar to all such regional groupings: unwillingness to give up sovereignty to make the Union work.

Said Tunisian sociologist Abdel Baki Hermassi: "I think the Tunisians and the Algcrians are willing to undergo that to some extent ... but the Moroccan monarchy, which considers itself to be above any constitutional constraints within Morocco, would not be willing to abdicate to the Maghreb what it refuses to its

Jurist Sadok Belaid, a Tunisian on the Maghreb Court, sees success in the fact that the union has not yet imploded: "When you transplant

Head of state: Chadi Benjedid Area: 2.4 million sq.km Pop: 25.36 million Life expectancy: 65 Independence: 1962 Debt: \$26.2 billion (1989) GDP: \$51.9 billion (1988) \$2,470 per capita

Head of state: Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali Area: 163,610 sq.km Pop: 8.17 million Life expectancy: 67 Independence: 1956 Debt: \$7.98 billion (1989) GDP: \$8.8 billion (1988) \$3,170 per capita

Head of state: Moammar Gadaffi Area: 1.8 million sq.km Pop: 4.54 million Life expectancy: 62 Independence: 1951 Debt: \$4.5 billion (1986) GDP: \$23 billion (1988) \$5,420 per capita

an organ from one body to another there is a necessary period of adaptation. What is important is that there hasn't yet

been a rejection."

How do you reject something that has been a romantic ideal almost since the collapse of the 13th Century Almohads, the last empire to hold sway from present-day Mauritania to

A cultural crossroads, the Maghreb forms the western edge of the Arab world, the southern shore of the Mediterranean and the northern tier of the African system. Its mix of Arab and Berber cultures makes it unique.

Its very name - in Arabic it means the west, or where the sun scts - marks off the Maghreb from the Mashrig. the eastern Arab world, or where the sun rises.

The 65 million people of the Maghreb are almost all Muslim of the Malakite Sunni sect. While many speak Berber dialects, Arabic is a common language for nearly all except a few of the black minority in Mauritania. The favourite dish almost

everywhere is couscous, the wheat-based staple served with boiled vegetables and meat. Former Tunisian leader Habib Bourguiba is said to have noted once that the Maghreb ends where people stop eating couscous and start eating rice.

Even the mosques look the same, with distinctive square minarets that become rounder as you head east and change dramatically at the Libyan frontier with Egypt.

And in addition to their cultural heritage, the people of the Maghreb shared decades of European domination, French in Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, and Italian in It was the hard boot of

colonialism at the beginning of this century that first rekindled the pan-Maghreb spirit. Said Tunisian sociologist Hermassi: "The Maghreb idea

has existed at different times

with different meanings. In the Fifties and Sixties people talked about Maghreb union but what they meant was emancipation from colonial-

Two things put the move towards union off course - the arrival of Libya's maverick leader, Moammar Gadafft in 1969 and war in the Western Sahara, with Morocco fighting. against Algerian-backed Poli

sario guerillas. There were various ill-fated attempts at union (most of them involving the Nasserist Gadaffi) when finally a 1983 treaty of friendship between Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania stuck.

By 1988, Algeria and Morocco had restored diplomatic relations after a bitter 12-year rift. The same year the five Maghreb heads of state met for the first time in Zeralda, Algeria, and set up a commission to draft a union

Necessity, not conviction, breathed new life into the idea of a greater Maghreb. Two decades of independence had only strengthened the Maghreb's economic dependence on Europe, with which it does nearly three-quarters of its trading. That relationship is threatened by the prospect of a unified European market at the end of 1992.

Said Mustapha Filali, Tunisia's representative on the current AMU secretariat: "We saw this economic space of 380 million people from 12 countries and wondered what are we going to do alone."

Gadaffi's antics very nearly put union off course once more when only days before the summit planned for February 17 in Marrakesh he announced that a North African union should include Mali. Chad. Niager and Sudan.

Algerian President Chadli Benjedid flew to Tripoli on February 13 to woo Gadaffi into accepting the original plan and to come to Marrakesh. Benjedid took the Libyan leader with him to Tunis for a meeting with Tunisian President Ben Ali who he entrusted to make sure Gadaffi made it to Marrakesh.

He did. With a flourish the Arab Maghreb Union was born and five proud father went out on the balcony, hands clasped together and held high.

- GEMINI NEWS

## Child-exploiters Include Terrorists

counts among its members influential people who hold posi tions of trust both in govern ment and private sector organ isations. Members include university professors, a scho olteacher, a journalist and representatives from the di rectorates of health, education, the police, the justice min istry, probation and child care and the United Nations

Children's Fund (UNICEF). Explaining how the group stands in relation to other organisations, Mr Weerakoon said: "NCF is not an attempt to override, supplant or in any way compete with the NGOs already doing excellent work in this field, but rather to network with them. We may be able to help them through bottlenecks.

NCF is not going to be another service organisation, he said. "But we can plug into the

system and get things moving." "Children are silent — they have no vote, no MPs, no pressure groups to speak for them. Sometimes they are even abused by their own parents, sold to baby farms while still in the womb or sold as servants, or abandoned. We are a voice for them," said Dr (Mrs) Hiranthi Wijemanne, Programmes Officer of UNICEF in Sri Lanka.

While children have always worked on family farms or in small family enterprises, em-

applicants wait here for

Mallika Wanigasundara writes from Colombo

2478 M

Action to reinforce the protection of children in Sri Lanka has been spurred by the additional suffering caused by intercommunal strife

ployment as a servant in someone clse's home is something else, pointed out Dr Tilak Nettiarachichi, a professor of sociology at the University of Colombo.

Dr Savitri Goonasckera, a law professor of the Open University, said Sri Lanka had a good track record where children were concerned, but there were visible signs of decline in the children's situation. "We have to galvanise public opinion and push authorities into action," she said.

Unlike in India, child labour is not institutionalised in Sri Lanka whether in industry or in the plantations. But they are be found working "unofficially" as helpers in homes and shops, on building sites and in marketplaces.

At the moment, NCF is focusing on violence against children, and has met with NGOs on the issue. Also at the top of its agenda is the enforcement of compulsory education, for which regulations are being framed. This will help stem the employment of

children as domestic servants. NCF thinks.

Like other countries which participated in the world summit on children in New York in 1990, Sri Lanka is preparing a Plan of Action for children which it hopes to tie up with the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) summit to be held later this year in Sri Lanka. NCF's job will be to needle the government to implement the Plan once it is in place, said Mr Weerakoon.

Sri Lanka has been more successful than its neighbours in reducing its infant mortality rate (IMR) which is 19.6 per 1,000 live births compared with India's 96, Bangladesh's 116, Nepal's 125 and Malawi's

Its has chalked up successes in other areas of child care. Immunisation of children against the six principal diseases of childhood is 87 per cent, reaching 90 per cent in some areas. Oral rehydration with locally made Jeevanee salts has been popularised, saving many lives. Maternal mortality is as low as 0.5 per 1,000 live births.

Literacy is high at around

87 per cent, with no discrimination against either gender in educational opportunities. Nor is their much difference between the IMR of girls and of

Programmes for children are implemented islandwide such as maternal and child care services, school feeding programmes, supplementary

feeding of infants and preschool children, free school books and foster parent schemes to assist children in their own homes.

On the other hand, some 7,500 infants (under one year) die each year in Sri Lanka. One in six is born underweight One in three infants suffers from under-nutrition. Thirtyeight pre cent of all deaths due to diarrhoea are among children under five years of age. Children with diarrhoea occupy 20 to 30 per cent of children's wards.

- Depthnews Asia

## OPINION

#### The Telephone Sector In a recent seminar in electronic locking). Dhaka on the rapid growth of

telecom facilities in the country, industry experts were of the opinion that privatisation of the telephone system necded to be reviewed on urgent basis, in view of the huge backlog of pending new connections, poor service standards, and rampant corrupt practises in vogue. In a growth industry, one of

the basic issues is the projected growth rate or potential; that is the market conditions; or, in other words, the supply and demand position. It was hinted that entre-

preneurs in the private sector were interested to go in for the telephone business in the private sector, as it was a profit making project. The suffering clients have

over 40 years' experience of how the public sector enterprises work (or, rather do not work). Today we see the sad spectacle of a popularly elected government carrying the burden of debt-ridden hemisemi-demi sector corpo-

rations. The situation has not changed much from the early years of Partition, when the semi-autonomous corpora tions, which were losing concerns, began earning profit in crores within the second or third year of passing into private hands (the schemes were perhaps secretly planned to operate in that manner).

A telephone system has to meet two basic objectives: nowait new connection, and reliable day-to-day service. The frills have lower priority. All digital telephone connections need not be ISD. Cheaper phones, limited to national dialling, should be offered at cheaper rate, (technically it is

Today, these conditions are not met. Over and above these shortcomings (add corrupt practices), the installation charges for a new telephone connection, may be the highest in the world. To cite an example, in Malaysia, the deposit for a world-wide ISD connection is about Taka 1000/- only, compared to Taka 20,000 here (recently reduced from 30,000). To get a new connection, it takes only a couple of days. Locally it has not been explained to the public why this rate is so high (consult the rate for 30 countries). This amount should be about two months' average btll (to allow time for disconnecting a defaulter's line). Why the telephone is considered a luxury item here?

When supply is more than demand, there would be no corruption (the other condition is competition). In developing countries, this situation takes time, due to financial restraints.

It is incorrect to assume that the demand for telephones is low in the DCs. Those who want telephone, and can afford it, should be able to have it quickly, without any red-tape. Why the middleclass and the upper middle class, and the fixed income groups should not be able to afford it, if the charges are proportionate to our income? It appears that the project costs, or the heavy losses, are being recovered too quickly by levying abnormally high rates.

Anyway, the way the telephone system works in this country needs a lot of explain-

> A Mawaz Dhaka

#### Canadian visa

Sir, I would like to draw the attention of his excellency the Canadian High Commissioner in Dhaka and the people in Canada to the inhuman sufferings of Bangladeshis seeking

Canadian visa. Canada being a member of Commonwealth operates in High Commission at Dhaka. But unfortunately the visa section operates from the Delhi mission. The staff from Delhi attend Bangladeshi visa applicants once in a couple of months for a few days.

The High Commission in Dhaka only issues the visa application forms and announces the dates of visa interviews. During the period of interview, the High Commission arranges temporary shelter outside the HC building for the visa applicants which is not enough for thousands of applicants. Thousands of visa

months to submit their applications. There is no standard system to follow. As such the suffering of the applicants are increasing day by day. The staff of the visa section develops their own system as per their individual choices which keep on changing with the frequent change of staff. During the time of interview the applicants have to wait outside the HC building queueing for nights and days to submit their application. Moreover during the days of interview all of a sudden the HC would announce that they won't see any more after receiving 10-15 applicants thus making the queue to be longer and aggravating the suffering of the applicants where no public facilities exist. The very attitude of the staff is negative and they even do not bother to treat the applicants as human beings. They do not attend

even 5% of the applicants during each trip. For last several months over 90% of the applicants wasted their time, money and energy and didn't have the chance of submitting their application.

There are number of diplomatic missions operating in this country in a very sysproper system.

applicants like this for months They should be honest enough to say that they will not allow Canada.

Bangla, Bangla Sir, We are Bangalees. Our mother tongue is Bangla. We

have been born and brought up on the soil which we made free and sovereign at the cost of a huge sacrifice of lives, properties and honour. For what? Understandably for many things but certainly not to give publicity for vote in English? Only Bangladeshis of age 18 and above are cligible to cast their vote. A big percentage of all those who can read and write, can read only Bangla. Then what is the sense in giving vote publicity in English when any foreigner is not eligible to vote? That too with incorrect spelling? On the front wall of a city shop, AARONG, it is written "CUST YOUR VOAT FOR ----", for example. Whom they are trying to impress? They should be

Bangladeshis to travel to

tematic manner without creating any sufferings to the applicants. The British and American missions are receiving hundreds of visa applicants four days a week without any problem just because of their The Canadian High Commission should not treat the

FR Chowdhury. Mohammadpur, Dhaka 1207

A Bangalee

ashamed rather.