

Dhaka, Tuesday, October 8, 1991

We Want a House, We Want a Home

On the World Habitat Day, observed on Monday by the international community, it must have struck many that we in Bangladesh live in a contrary world of our own. The only sector of our economy that has shown any sign of vigour over the years is the area of building activity. And that has been recognized on all hands as a sure sign of bad health on the part of our overall economic performance and outlook. We could take that provided these rising jungles of concrete in Dhaka and crumbling-to-earth hills in Chittagong would mean any mitigation of the urban housing problem now fast going out of hand.

Even bears have their lair and moles live in burrowed sanctuary, the babut swallows build a double-chambered high-ceiling cozy swinging cote and all denizens jealously prize a den be it on land or down the seas. And yet tens of millions of human beings now live without a roof on their head. It is long that man has not lived in the open and has developed home both for individual or communal living. If language and labour are two distinguishing marks of humanity, home can be the third greatest factor contributing to what constitutes the human phenomenon. After material and cultural advancement over tens of millennia during which man has established himself as the unquestioned master of the planet, the 'Wise Man' is finding that a hefty part of it doesn't have a home.

Homelessness and poor and bad housing as elements of imposed reality shaping from overall imbalance and lack of adequate organisational and managerial efficiency of the society is a new late 20th century development and is taking on as its helpless prey most of the nations of Latin America and Africa. In a fantastic performance nations of the Asiatic Pacific run have in a matter of decades leaped miles in material prosperity as well as in matching standard and quality of life — the latter depending largely on a wide distribution of good homes, and the making of such good homes depending almost wholly on the former. Japan, China, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand are some of the Asian miracle stories where homes have become better and within reach of more people. Sri Lanka and Burma had enjoyed better homes from before as a matter of rich cultural legacy.

No such luck for Bangladesh. At least 30 million of its citizens have given up even dreaming of someday living in something like home. While in the villages homelessness can be tackled by individual families through taking advantage of a mild and all-clemency weather except for the wet days during the rains and the chilly ones in winter, in the towns, even that is hard to organise. As most of townspeople are anyway homeless — a floating population living in rented houses — the urban housing problem involves the question of having and practising a housing policy that would at once take care of finding home for hundreds of thousands on both rental and sale basis and on the private sector stopping the cities from becoming a hostage to mindless realtors.

We are sorry to record that government has not so far done anything to merit commendation in the matter of low-cost housing on a massive scale. It is neither inconceivable nor impractical that the government take up building 50,000 flats at the cost of half a Jamuna Bridge — the money to be retrieved through the familiar and easy hire-purchase system which could even plough in some profit on top of the interest involved for the government. For those that have the means to go for expansive accommodation on their own resources, the development of suburbia is the answer and Uttara and Baridhara are the first footfalls in that direction.

While the question of massive housing is old hat to government and none-too-unpopular with them either — thinking on a big scale and genuinely willing to have it here and now is all that is needed for the thing to click.

The villages are spilling bulk of their less successful population into the cities all the time. If villages can again be made to live by way of stopping pauperisation and concentration of land into a few hands and generation of employment — the rural housing problem can take care of itself and at the same time help ease off the critical situation in the cities.

Germany and Racism

The recent spate of attacks on foreigners in Germany has given rise to concern in the Federal Republic as well as in other countries. Racism, when related to Germany has a greater impact on the public mind than when it occurs in other countries. This is most unfortunate, even unfair. After all, why should attacks on Turk residents in Germany be any more condemnable than assaults on Indians or Bangladeshis in Britain by neo-Nazi goons? The reason, of course, is that the question of racism in Germany invariably invokes lingering but still bitter memories of the 1930s and the 40s.

But Germany today is a far cry from Adolf Hitler's Reich. The new Germany has a liberal and democratic track record that compares well with Europe's other free societies. German laws relating to political asylum, enshrined in the constitution, have made the country a model of political tolerance.

Unfortunately, it is partly this liberal asylum policy and its use and abuse that have contributed to the alarming growth in racist tendencies in Germany. But since Germany is not an immigrant accepting country, all entrants have to remain as political refugees without the right to work. The result is that the state has to bear the cost of looking after hundreds of thousands of foreign guests.

However, it would be a tragedy if racist violence compelled the German government to give up its admirable liberal policies towards politically-persecuted people. That could quite conceivably send the wrong signal to the racists and prepare the grounds for a neo-Nazi resurgence in Central Europe. The boldest step Chancellor Helmut Kohl could take in the matter is to reaffirm Germany's commitment to liberalism which would win it even more friends in the world at large than it already has. Introduction of an immigration policy to make incomers undertake responsibilities of working residents i.e. paying their way and paying taxes to the state, would greatly reduce the government's burden and make it possible to differentiate between economic immigrants and bona fide refugees from persecution.

Power Struggle Prolongs the Afghan Agony

by Daya Kishan Thussu

The changing contours of Third World regional conflicts are reflected in the decision by the United States and the Soviet Union to stop arms supplies to opposing parties in the 12-year-old Afghan civil war. But peace may still elude Afghanistan as regional power-brokers and local vested interests strive to fill the vacuum left by the superpowers and thus prolong the agony of Afghanistan.

his overthrow in 1973 — in any future Afghan government.

Islamabad-supported fundamentalist Hizb-i-Islami and its high-profile leader Gulbuddin Hikmatyar want an Islamic government in Kabul.

The Afghan President, Dr Sayid Mohammed Najibullah, in power since 1986, has played his cards skilfully.

After an abortive coup in March 1990 by General Shar Nawaz Tanai, then Afghan Defence Minister, Najibullah purged from power the Khalq (masses) members of the ruling party, leaving the Parcham (flat) faction in control.

The US has insisted that Najibullah must step down before any talk are held to resolve the civil war. But, given the Mojahedin record, Washington may agree to a coalition government that includes Najibullah.

Washington is worried about what might happen if Gulbuddin Hikmatyar were to come to

power on a fundamentalist Islamic platform, fearing it would start a cold war between Islam and the West.

Concerns are already being expressed about the 'Lebanonisation of Afghanistan' if the central authority in Kabul crumbles.

Meanwhile, leaders from Pakistan met the Afghan rebels in Tehran in August to discuss the five-point United Nations peace plan, which calls for a ceasefire and the establishment of a broad-based interim government pending elections.

Despite these moves by Moscow and Washington, millions of Afghans continue to suffer. Afghans form the world's biggest refugee population.

More than three million are concentrated in the North Western Province of neighbouring Pakistan, straining already scarce resources. In addition, an estimated two million Afghans have sought refuge in Iran.

The United Nations has cut the budget for Afghan refugees by more than 30 million dollars, undermining its Operation Salam programme to rehabilitate the refugees. Half are children who have never seen Afghanistan, born in refugee camps that rival the misery of those of the Palestinians.

Pakistan has suffered much because of the conflict in its neighbourhood. The Afghan civil war has been responsible for the militarisation of Pakistani society most noticeable in its Sindh province.

The free flow of arms also has implications across the border in the Indian states of Kashmir and Punjab, where secessionist groups are alleged to receive military supplies from sources operating on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Observers believe that it will be easy to cut Moscow's military aid to Kabul, but not the weapon supplies to various rebel groups as some have been getting military and financial support from Iran and Pakistan. Najibullah, an astute survivor, has proved many times over that the Western experts were wrong about his future. Given the disarray among his opponents, the cutting of military aid may not be the last straw for him. In fact, he welcomed the Moscow decision. After the 'Second Russian Revolution', he may be looking for possible support from Central Asian Soviet republics.

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Afghanistan: end of civil war?

1973 King Mohamed Zahir Shah deposed, republic declared
1978 Communist-led military coup
1979 Civil war; President Taraki murdered by colleague Hafizullah Amin - himself killed during Soviet invasion. Babrak Karmal becomes President
1986 Najibullah comes to power
1989 Soviets complete troop withdrawal
Sept. US, Soviet Union decide to cut 1991 arms supply

Seven guerrilla groupings make up the Islamic Union of the Afghan Mojahedin, supported by the US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia



Diplomatic Blunder Still a Live Issue

RODOLFO Sambajon showed agitation as he talked about President Corazon Aquino's executive order allowing foreign fishing vessels to pass through the Philippines' northern seascanes.

"It's a scut," he said with a heavy sigh. "It has legalised Taiwanese poaching in our territorial waters."

Mr Sambajon has reason to feel concerned. He is chairman of the National Movement of Small Fishermen in the Philippines, with a membership of roughly 53,000 in 31 of the country's 72 provinces.

In the Philippine Senate recently, Mrs Aquino's one-time defence minister, Juan Ponce Enrile, strongly criticised her for undermining the Senate's constitutional power to ratify, or reject, any pact.

For Mr Enrile, the President's action provided yet more political ammunition which he can fire off at her as next year's national elections, which will select a new president and other officials, draw closer.

Although Mrs Aquino will not run for re-election in the May polls, she has said that by January she will endorse a favoured candidate to replace her. Clearly, opposition leaders are not going to allow the fisheries issue to die quietly.

Mrs Aquino signed the executive fiat on August 5 to douse the controversy sparked

by an agreement on fishery and agriculture forged by Philippine and Taiwanese officials in Taipei on July 7.

Under the Manila-Taipei accord, Taiwanese trawlers would have been allowed to pass through the northern Philippine seascanes in exchange for five patrol ships and Taiwan's help in modernising certain port facilities and rehabilitating farmland damaged by Mount Pinatubo's eruptions in June.

The presidential order, which superseded the Manila-Taipei agreement before it was to take effect 30 days after its signing, opened the northern seascanes to all foreign fishing vessels. But it was widely seen as an accommodation for Taiwanese trawler fishers.

"No other foreign fishing vessels pass through the designated passageway but Taiwanese and Japanese trawlers," Sambajon said.

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Before Mrs Aquino signed the executive fiat, commentators and some officials denounced agreement with Taiwan as a violation of the Philippines' One-China policy which it concurred with Beijing in 1975.

Under that accord, the Philippines must treat the People's Republic of China as

Casiano Mayor writes from Manila

Political opponents of Mrs Aquino, as well as apprehensive Filipino fishermen, are keeping alive the controversy over an abortive fishery treaty with Taiwan

the sole representative of the Chinese people, with Taiwan as one of China's provinces. The accord allows "people-to-people" contact with Taiwan but forbids official relations with the Taipei government.

The Taipei-Manila pact was signed by Mrs Aquino's chief of staff, Roberto Rafael Lucila, and Tju Mau-ying, vice chairman of Taiwan's Council of Agriculture, behind the back of the Philippines' foreign affairs department.

As expected, Beijing criticised the Manila government over the incident. Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Raul Manglapus quietly dissociated himself from it.

Mrs Aquino's diplomatic blunder, as the Taipei-Manila fishery agreement turned out to be, arose from the President's efforts to attract Taiwan.

Over the past five years, Mrs Aquino has sent officials to Taipei to lure Taiwanese investors to the Philippines and to enhance job opportunities for Filipino contract workers

In Taiwan and protect those already there.

Beijing expressed displeasure over Manila's flirting with Taipei, but Mrs Aquino had publicly assured Beijing that her officials' occasional missions were unofficial in nature. When she signed her executive order that retained the features of the shelved Taipei-Manila accord, she said she hoped Beijing would understand her country's economic predicament.

Some government officials said the presidential fiat would help solve fishing rows occasionally sparked by the detention of Taiwanese fishermen

OPINION

Of Patients and Hospitals

I was talking to a friend whose father, aged 62, was fighting for his life in Dhaka Medical College Hospital. She said sadly, "You know, it is better to die at home, rather than going to DMCH. It is like experiencing a hell while living in this world." Her sadness and utter frustration about the medical facilities of our country alarmed me. Immediately I thought of my old parents and people around me. What will happen if we fall sick? We will have the same experience my friend is having, thinking the same way, she is thinking! But alas! We have nowhere to go other than the Government run hospitals to get medical help in Bangladesh.

Of course there are many private clinics, nursing homes in the city which only rich people can afford. Even if you manage, you can not get satisfactory treatments there too. Many of these clinics have rooms with attached bathrooms (some of them air-conditioned even), with some young doctors and so-called nurses, but no atmosphere of a hospital. Most of these clinics have no operation theatre, no intensive care unit and no pathological and diagnostic facilities.

Moreover, you can never depend or rely on the pathological reports. Lack of laboratory equipment for pathological tests; lack of medical, surgical equipment and the uncaring, indifferent attitude of the doctors and nurses of the hospitals and the owners of the clinics are mainly responsible for the vacuum in our medical system. Once I saw a new-born child to die for want of oxygen in Dhaka Medical College Hospital. I wanted to

give a modern oxygen cylinder unit and arranged it from their UNICEF Representative Dr. Michel Irwin. But to my utter disbelief the then Principal of the Medical College refused to take it, and he had a very good reason for not accepting! He said that the users (Medical College Staff) would not take proper care of the machine and very soon it would be out of order, and the authority did not have any budget for repairing it. So what's the use?

What does it matter to them if a child dies for want of oxygen? How does it affect them if a young man dies of brain haemorrhage without getting any medical attention? Sometimes I fail to understand why the doctors and nurses are so apathetic towards their patients. Is this that there are less doctors and more patients? Is this that the nurses are not well paid? Or, are they unable to grasp the value of human life?

While visiting DMCH once I saw a dead body of a new-born child lying in a cage like thing near the children's ward. After enquiry I came to know that the menials were on strike and nobody would remove the body until and unless the strike was called off. The doctors, nurses seemed to be uninterested about it, even though I, as a layman knew that the ghastly smell coming out of the body was endangering the lives of the other newborns in that room and, as such, anybody could have removed it for their sake.

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not streamline and raise the standard of the service and facility. It is only the intention and sincerity of the government. They will have to decide whether the hospitals are for the suffering patients or for the so-called doctors and nurses. Sadly it appears now from their (doctors and nurses) behaviour that the poor patients are paying for their 'sins' of being patients, and only they (doctors, nurses) have the right to survive!

If necessary, the government will have to cut the budget for unproductive sector and spend more for health and education. More operation theatres, intensive care units should be added to the government hospitals, so that a poor patient should not have to wait for years to get a date for operation from the surgeon in a government hospital. We can well sacrifice some of our luxuries to build more hospitals, clinics; to import more equipment to diagnose disease; to train more people in the use and maintenance of the equipment. If Thais and Indians for example, can do it why can't we? Why we will have to go to Calcutta, Bangkok, Delhi for a medical check up or treatment? We will have to inspire the rich people to donate to hospitals, build wings in their names for the use of poor people, which is very common even in developed countries.

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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.

Presidential election

Sir, In a parliamentary form of government, the office of the President is mostly symbolic and ceremonial and he acts only in an advisory capacity. In a country like Bangladesh, where institutions have not taken deep roots and the very democratic process is fragile — the office of the President takes on an added weight and importance. The office of the President becomes all powerful in times of national and constitutional crises.

In this background the presidential election will be held today. We have two very able and well known personalities who are contesting for the presidential post. One is an eminent justice and juror, and the other is a highly reputed lawyer and politician of long standing. But unfortunately, in their eagerness and haste to attain the office of the Presidency, both the candidates have acted injudiciously and tarnished their image in

many who would like and plead to both the candidates to withdraw from the Presidential race — let someone run and be elected in this august office who is not controversial and for whom the lure for the office is less important than national interest and unity.

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Judicial committee report

Sir, The fate of the Indemnity Repel Bill is now the business of the esteemed members of our National Parliament in the forthcoming session.

For the time being may we request the democratic government to publish the reports of the Judicial Committees on the 1975 Jail Killing and the assassination of President Ziaur Rahman. What is the harm in making a judicial committee report on the killing of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Rahman? We trust the state will take care of the sad affairs of a former head of the state.

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