

Clarification Needed

Prime Minister Khaleida Zia, while addressing a group of industrial workers from Tongi at her Sugandha office on Friday, said her government would retain ownership of profit-making industries. Reported by the state-owned Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS), the story did not carry any further elaboration. But given the subject matter in question — state-owned enterprises and what the government plans to do with them — the prime minister's comments have left a number of raised eyebrows among economic observers as well as in private sector circles.

According to the government's Industrial Policy, announced recently by the Minister for Industry Shamsul Islam Khan, the new government is committed to privatisation of all state-owned enterprises except a handful of strategic industries such as power, gas, the railways, telephone and telegraph etc. But, in principle, the government is committed to large scale withdrawal from economic activities, and allow the growth of a fully-fledged free market economy. The impression was that, while it would not be difficult to privatise profit-making and efficiently-run concerns, certain reform programmes would have to be undertaken in industries that are chronically sick, in order to make them attractive to private sector investors who would naturally not like to be stuck with a white elephant. But there has not been any doubt in the public mind, so far, that de-nationalisation would be comprehensive and all-encompassing, either through tenders or through floating of shares in the stock market.

Naturally then, the prime minister's comments about retaining profit-earning industries have led to considerable degree of confusion. If the government will, in fact, retain control or outright ownership of any given number of industry on the grounds of profitability, then are we to understand that the guidelines set out in the Industrial Policy have already been changed? In other words, will the government remain committed to its previously-stated policy of "total disinvestment", or will it now privatise only on a selective basis i.e. only those units costing the exchequer too much would be off loaded?

Answer to this question is important, because the private sector entrepreneur would naturally like to be clear about the extent and scope of the government's privatisation policy before drawing up his own investment plans. Such confusion could well cause uncertainty and hesitation in business circles that is not only unnecessary, but could also be detrimental to the process of economic regeneration. There are few things an entrepreneur, local or foreign, likes better than clarity of government policy, which would allow him to predict future course of events with any degree of confidence, and thus be able to plan ahead.

While we would certainly hesitate to doubt that the government's Industrial Policy is meant for implementation, it would be of some relief if the government would clarify the prime minister's comments on Friday, and set the record straight on privatisation. At this critical moment in our development process, the authorities would certainly serve the country better if they concentrated on drawing up and implementing reform plans necessary to breathe life into our sick industries. Sustained recovery in the industrial sector is the urgent need of the hour, for which we need clear-cut policies to be carried through without creating confusion.

The Crumbling Society?

Saleha Khatun was travelling on the Khulna-bound Mahananda Mail the other day. One of the railway security guards started abusing her on suspicion that she was but a criminal. At a point she started to protest. The enraged guard gave her a mighty kick with his booted legs — so mighty that she was thrown out of the running train and is now fighting for her life in the Chuadanga Hospital.

In a Netrokona high school a teacher entered a senior class and as the class was proceeding with lessons in Bengali literature, he asked of the students as to their favourite poets. The class's outstanding student said Sukanto was his favourite. The teacher got angry and ordered the boy to kneel down. Then he brought a cane and lashed the boy for 49 times. That was the point when the boy, on the point of passing out, started rolling on his sides. The teacher then got on top of him and began beating him with his fist and knuckles. The boy was saved by classmates and has been hospitalized.

Cruelty is as old as humanity. The Bengalees as a people have no record of being particularly given to this inhuman burst of violence which however is to be found only among humans. The record has been sullied in a most unfortunate way in the past decade or two. The Munir case or the Nidarabad nightmare — and repeated visitations by equally harrowing reports of raping and killing of persons — children and women and old men — have made cruelty into a national characteristic of the Bengalees of the present day. Even in that kind of a backdrop the above two cases stand out.

That railway guard is plainly not fit to guard anything whatsoever. And that teacher should long have found a national habitat in a lunatic asylum. But sadly for us all thousands of such guards and teachers, and tens of thousands in other equally respectable garbs, continue to lord it over in our society. Indeed, any bully, be he or she a senior member of the family or on the upper perches in social and professional equations, is but brother or sister of that guard and teacher.

They must be taken on legally, to be sure, and punished. But that alone cannot heal this malaise. Without a balanced social and individual development of our citizens' ways about their daily life — a kinder society would not be possible. And that is not going to come in the near future. Society is crumbling as an integrated social whole. We must start talking about more and more on ever wider forums with all the seriousness we can command.

MR Justice Shahabuddin, after having steered the nation to its democratic goal, has relinquished his office and will soon, may be in a matter of days, be resumed his original job of the Chief Justice. He was always anxious to return and knowing well that there could be difficulties on the way, he had made it a condition for his assumption of office that the three alliances would see to it at the appropriate time and make it possible for him to return. The alliances have kept their word and by unanimously passing the 11th amendment, have removed the legal difficulty of an ex-judicial return.

All this has been done according to Justice Shahabuddin's own formula. No other and no better alternative was ever seriously suggested, and there fore the matter rests there.

During the last few days in his office, the Acting President had to receive Chiefs of armed services and others who called on him as courtesy and protocol demanded and had to attend ceremonies in which farewell took the customary form of a ritual. These must have been occasions highly charged with emotion. On at least one such ceremonials, the Acting President looked visibly moved. Though usually a master of his emotions, Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed must have had moments during these days when he had to fight hard to keep his emotions under control.

He was the man of destiny during the past ten months and he must have been fully

TRIBUTE TO SHAHABUDDIN

Fare Well and Fare Forward

aware of it. On his success or failure hung the fate of the nation. A lot more important than his ability to return was his ability to deliver the goods. A Chief Justice was himself on trial, so to say, and he has acquitted himself well. And this seems to be the consensus, here and abroad.

Other chief justices before him who had been called upon to occupy the chair had a limited responsibility. They were not really responsible to the nation for they had not been elected by the nation. They came into office under very different circumstances and their tenure in office was always in secure. There was always something pathetic about their departure as there was always something fortuitous, even theatrical and ominous, about their induction into office. Not much significance could be read either in their coming or in their going. An entirely different thing was the manner and the circumstances in which Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed came into office with the mandate, virtually of the whole nation, to give something for the nation's delivery which the nation had lost — democracy and a freely elected government. Others before him had no such mandate, nor had they the means to do any such thing, even if they wanted to. How he was baffled and frustrated in his sincere at-

tempt to do so, Justice Sayem in his confessional little book has barely suggested. And it doesn't look that he himself knew the full story.

While evaluating Justice Shahabuddin's performance as the Acting President, fortunate in many ways which his bears were not, it will not do to minimise his problems. He had many. The nature of these problems changed with the coming into office of a political government. In the first phase of his tenure he was able to act

modest. He had to face mounting pressures, either to do or not to do, certain things. He had to take into confidence the very forces that had been the support of the regime just toppled. The higher bureaucracy, as always, was chameleon like, changing colour with the change in the background. Quite a few of the top bureaucrats had been too much identified with Ershad and fully shared his stigma. How many of these alleged collaborators could be safely dis-

Perhaps rightly, the government that the Acting President formed immediately after the February elections, that is as soon as the final results were available, was done on the principle of the Parliamentary form of Government. This was not a necessity till such time as the constitutional amendment had become a fact, that is till the passing of the 12th amendment. He thought it wise to usher in the form of government for which the nation had been clamouring, thereby inviting upon himself the problem of having to play a well-nigh impossible role. The problems of the first phase were replaced by a new set of problems, constitutional and administrative in nature. In playing this role the Acting President had to show both patience and dexterity. But the strains were visible, and if there has been a perceptible greying in his hair, the reasons can be guessed.

The severest challenge that he must have been facing was the one to his avowed neutrality, which he was able to maintain in the first phase of his rule. I am far from suggesting that he was unable to do so in his second phase. All I am saying is that the question of neutrality took on new dimensions under the changed circumstances. A neutral and non-political President at the had of a fiercely and stridently

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

as the President under a Presidential form of government. In the second phase, though still remaining a President in the same sense, we saw him withdrawing into the background, leaving the stage largely to his Prime Minister, and letting her play a role somewhat beyond her constitutional size.

Perhaps the difference can be put in this way: till the time the February elections were held, the Acting President felt himself, and himself alone, responsible for doing the supreme job assigned to him. He had unquestioned authority to do so, and he felt no qualms in exercising his authority. But the situation, especially in the early weeks, was volatile, to put it at the

Americans Keep Foot in the Gulf with Kuwait Pact

Mohammed Aslam writes from Dubai

UNEXPECTEDLY strong opposition by Iran to a United States-Kuwait military co-operation agreement seems to have complicated the search for a long-term security mechanism for the oil-rich Gulf region.

The Iranian government, despite its neutral position during the Gulf crisis triggered by last year's Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, has all along opposed any arrangement involving external — especially US — military presence in the region.

It was vehemently opposed to Kuwaiti plans revealed in August to allow British and US bases to deter any new threat from Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

The Iranian reaction to the formal Kuwait-US agreement signed on September 19 in Washington was swift and sharp, even though the deal does not provide for any permanent bases.

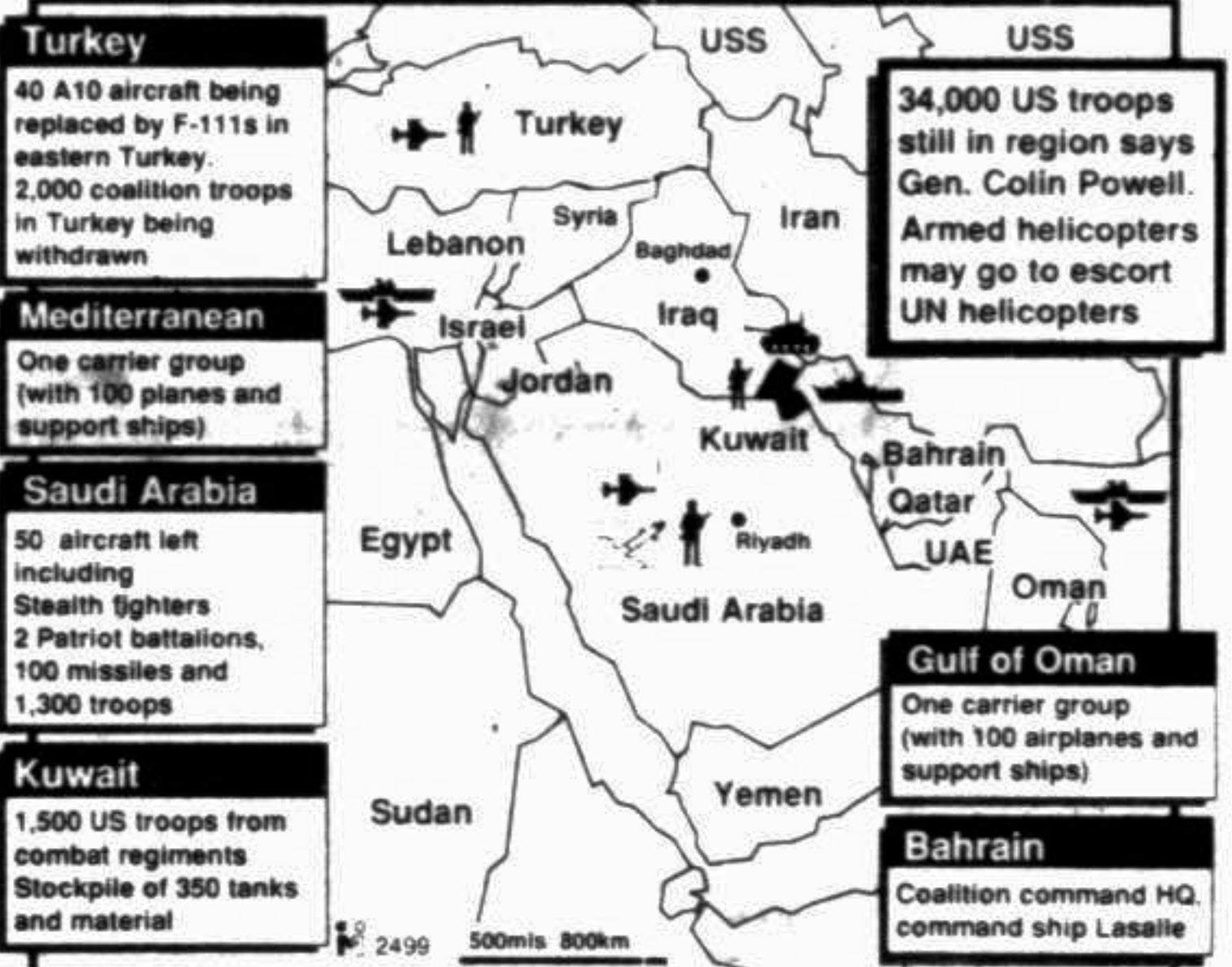
The 10-year US-Kuwait pact allows the US to keep troops in Kuwait longer than originally planned. Some 1,500 soldiers will remain, instead of the total withdrawal proposed earlier.

The pact also allows for joint training and military exercises with Kuwaiti armed forces and the stockpile of a division of US tanks and other military material for use in an emergency. Visits by US warplanes and ships to Kuwaiti facilities are authorised.

Talks are still to be held to determine exactly what weaponry and supplies will be

In the flurry over UN inspections of Baghdad's nuclear programme and new US threats to use force against Iraq, a deal providing for a long-term US presence in Kuwait has been signed in Washington. Under the deal, virtually unnoticed by the Western media, the US has continued access to Kuwaiti airfields and ports and is allowed to stockpile hundreds of tanks and military supplies. The pact has angered Iran, which opposes any foreign presence in the region.

Where US forces are



stored, and there is also speculation whether they will be looked after by US servicemen. Tanks and other equipment will obviously have to be maintained on a regular basis to ensure combat preparedness.

Washington has said similar arrangements are being nego-

While Kuwait has been anxious to get itself under the Western defence umbrella, and its concern has been recognised by all as a special case, the other member-states are opposed to any foreign bases or ground military presence on their soil.

Iran remains firmly against a foreign role in Gulf security, especially when Iran itself is not involved. Acting on the orders of the Supreme Security Council, the Iranian foreign ministry summoned Kuwait's charge d'affaires in Tehran to demand an explanation of the pact.

The signing has revived anti-US rhetoric in Iranian government circles and the media — a departure from the softer attitude towards the West of recent months.

One Persian-language newspaper dubbed Washington "the number one enemy of the Islamic revolution." Another said the pact "is drawn up unilaterally to suit the interest of Washington and disgraces the Kuwaiti government as a powerless subservient."

And President Hashemi Rafsanjani, whose moderate

stance has virtually transformed Iranian foreign policy despite occasional outbursts of conservative thinking, used the 11th anniversary of the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war to criticise the US.

"The region," he was quoted as saying, "is not calm and those diabolic forces which were present in the scene against us in the last stages of the war are now trying to strengthen their hold in the region."

In the final stages of the eight-year conflict that ended August 1988, the US escorted oil tankers to protect against Iranian attacks in the Gulf.

Kuwait had placed half its tanker fleet under the US flag. The American protection foiled the Iranian strategy to choke the Gulf and make shipping impossible.

It was presumed to have contributed directly to the abrupt end of the war when Iran accepted the UN ceasefire resolution.

American and other Western navies are once again at the centre of the security

framework being put together, a plan that involves few foreign ground forces in the area.

Western warships have remained in the vital waterway, through which the bulk of the world's crude oil passes, for nearly four decades and they may now be used to underpin the security arrangements.

At their latest meeting in Saudi Arabia's Red Sea port city of Jeddah, the GCC foreign ministers welcomed improved relations with Iran and expressed hope for a new phase of co-operation.

The Damascus Declaration signed in March by the GCC states and Egypt and Syria had at one stage emerged as the basis of just such an arrangement, but Kuwait's special needs and the issues of cost and composition of a joint force have since diluted that agreement.

Iran had welcomed the exclusion of Western states from the pact, but nevertheless rejected it as impractical without a role being assigned to Tehran.

There is near consensus among the region's Arab states, including Kuwait, that realistically any arrangement needs the blessing of Iran. But there is little agreement on the nature of Iran's potential role. If that role is largely political, it is not likely to satisfy Tehran.

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Japan

Wanted: A New Prime Minister

temporary prop set up by the largest faction in the LDP controlled by Noboru Takeshita who had to step down from the prime ministership for his role in the Recruit shares-for-favour stock scandal in 1989.

Analysts are playing a guessing game as to who the winner will be but say the race can be roughly narrowed down to the two senior candidates from among four vying for the LDP presidency.

The president of the LDP, who is chosen from candidates appointed by the four different factions in the party, becomes prime minister.

"Kaifu has proven himself a weak leader because he was slow to take a positive stand in international matters such as during the Gulf War and the attempted coup in the Soviet Union," explained Minoru Morita, a senior political analyst.

A strong contender is Kichii

Japan needs a leader strong enough to preside over its assumption of a world diplomatic leadership role but one who is also clean. Suvendrini Kakuchi of IPS reports from Tokyo.

Miyazawa, 71, a former finance minister and deputy prime minister, who heads the third largest faction in the party.

Miyazawa, who announced his intention to seek the LDP presidency in early September, is respected for his English proficiency and strong connections in the United States.

"These are some of the advantages that would make Miyazawa a keen statesman who could lead Japan to taking new responsibilities," explained Morita.

Other analysts, however, doubt Miyazawa's sincerity as a

politician.

"He talks intelligently but he cannot be trusted," said political commentator Rutaro Hosokawa who is known for his close connections to senior politicians.

"Most people feel he will not follow through on what he promises," Hosokawa added.

Miyazawa, who recently apologised publicly for his alleged involvement in the Recruit scandal which forced his resignation in 1989, appeared last week in a 90-minute talk show with former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger showing off his abil-

ity to converse in English and rub shoulders with international figures.

Another potential candidate is former Finance Minister Michio Watanabe who was also disgraced in the Recruit scandal but has promised political reform if he is elected.

"Watanabe is a frank politician which is what Japan needs, a leader who can tell the world the truth and be respected for it," said Hosokawa.

Analysts say Watanabe would be effective in Asia because of his close relations with China, Cambodia and Vietnam. Besides, he will have strong backing within the LDP, which would help him in carrying out reforms.

But Watanabe, who often appears in public puffing on a huge cigar, has caused controversy with his insensitive and racist remarks.

Tajul Islam Asstt. Headmaster Khandal High School, Feni.

Islam in Soviet Union

Sir, In an article titled "Soviet Central Asia: The next Islamic Revolution," the London-based "Economist" weekly magazine reported in its 21st - 27th September issue — "Islam is the fastest growing system of belief in what used to be called the Soviet Union. Two years ago there were 160 working mosques in Central Asia and Kazakhstan, the Soviet Islamic heartland. Now

these are more than 5000. Up to 60 million Muslims live in the Soviet Union, more than in any Gulf state. ...

"With ten mosques opening every day, with the authorities losing influence over the official representatives of Islam and with the Islamic Renaissance party registered in Central Asia, the ground is prepared for an Islamic upsurge which is likely to shake the crumbling pillars of secular authority in Central Asia."

This may be of interest to a good number of other readers.

M A Zafar Shah, Assistant Professor, University of Dhaka.

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.

Girl students' tuition fee

Sir, The government decided to allow all the girl students from classes vi to viii in the schools outside the municipal areas to read free of tuition fees from January 1990. It was a remarkable step for

spreading female education in the country. But the actual amount given to the schools as subsidy against their lost tuition fees, due to nonpayment of the same by the girl students, is an insignificant part of what ought to have been given by the government. The government has actu-

ally given 5(five) per cent of the amount that is derived after multiplying the teachers and employees benefit given by government in one month (i.e in Nov '90) by 12. So no importance to the estimate taken by the government from the schools has been given. At the same time, it has also been observed that some schools and madrasahs where very little number or no girls students are there have obtained good subsidy for this purpose! At most of the upazila headquarter specially no girl student is there in the boys' schools and madrasahs and there is no logic in giving these institutions any subsidy for girl stu-

dents' tuition fees. It should also be mentioned that the schools which are not being able to take any tuition fees from the girl students are financially hard hit when the government is not subsidising full the amount lost by them. Obviously the financial crisis of these schools is being intensified day by day, because main source of private schools' income is the monthly tuition fees of their students. In many of the rural schools again the number of girl students is almost half of their total number of students.

Under the circumstance, we appeal to the government to fully subsidise the girl stu-

dents' tuition fees so that all these institutions may survive.