

For a More Effective Commonwealth

It is in many ways a changed world in which the 11th Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) will start in the Zimbabwean capital of Harare from Wednesday. The Cold War is at an end. The international divide on ideological lines is no more. The propping up of undemocratic governments or military dictatorships by either of the two superpowers on the ground of supporting an ideological or strategic ally is out of fashion. To put it positively, it is a far more democratic world in which the Commonwealth Heads of Government will meet. But at the same time it is also a far poorer world, burdened with enormous debt and one in which wealth is continuing to shift to the rich countries. And it is in this world that the Commonwealth will have to find a more effective role for itself. For a long time the issue of apartheid dominated the deliberations of the CHOGM. As there are so many members of the Commonwealth from Africa and as racism is a most despicable and hateful affront to our civilization, the focus of the CHOGMs on the issue of South Africa was justified. Perhaps time has come to change the main focus. Not only because some progress has been made to gain some of the fundamental rights of the black people but also because other issues must be given the due attention of the Commonwealth members that, to some extent, may be said to have been neglected in the past.

Commonwealth as an important multilateral body must deal with some of the immediate problems of its members. Commonwealth today has become more important than before and is perhaps more capable of solving the real problems faced by its members. First and foremost, Commonwealth should look within itself as to how to improve trade and commerce among its own members. There was a time when the main focus was on more economic and technical assistance for the developing member countries of the Commonwealth. However, now, while the issue of development assistance remains valid for countries like Bangladesh, the focus is on increased trade and commerce. With the European Community becoming a single trading block from 1992 and of which Britain will form an integral part, access of Commonwealth members to UK markets becomes a matter of great concern.

The Trinidad and Tobago Terms, worked out in September 1990, was a major initiative of the Commonwealth to ease the debt burdens of many low income countries. It doubled the write-off element from one third to two thirds and lengthened the repayment period from 14 to 25 years. The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation is another initiative which achieved considerable success. Starting with UK 400,000 pounds in 1971, today it operates as a leading international technical assistance agency with a fund of 30 million pounds.

Bangladesh should play a more active role within the Commonwealth and try to benefit from many of its facilities. The set up by the Commonwealth to channel private investments from industrial countries to the emerging capital markets of Commonwealth developing countries may be of benefit to us if we can attract it. Malaysia and India have already benefited from it. Pakistan will do so in the future. We in Bangladesh should look into as to how we could bring some of that investment here.

For Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia the CHOGM will provide the first opportunity to make personal contact with heads of 50 Commonwealth members. It will also be her first real chance to make her mark in international arena. Being the elected leader of a democratic country will naturally give her greater prestige and more moral authority than her predecessor ever enjoyed in the international community. We wish her all success in her first major venture into the world of diplomacy and multilateral politics.

It's Chernobyl Again

Although the fire that broke out on Friday in a turbine room of the Chernobyl nuclear plant was put out in a matter of hours and, according to the initial report, there has been no leakage of radioactivity or injuries, one cannot lightly dismiss the accident in this ill-fated Soviet power station. After all, the memory of the disaster that shook Chernobyl — and the whole of Europe — just five years ago remains fresh in public mind, with scientists and doctors still debating over the long-term consequences of radiation let loose by the accident.

Until the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has studied a full report on the fire, due to be submitted to the UN agency by the plant authorities this week, one cannot say too firmly what really went wrong in what an expert has described as an accident-prone power station. It is hoped that the submission of the report will be followed by a full enquiry by the IAEA, no matter what is revealed in the initial finding of the Soviet authorities.

In effect, some questions have already been raised by a British scientist who has just toured several nuclear power stations in the Soviet Union. During a BBC interview, he has suggested that the Chernobyl plant might well have some structural problems in its safety mechanism, which probably exist in other nuclear stations in the country. At this stage, it is hard to say whether this is an informed opinion or an educated guess. But it is important enough to receive due attention of the IAEA. The disposal of nuclear waste in the Soviet Union, which is shrouded in a mystery in most industrialised countries in the world — and not just in USSR — should also be discussed between Moscow and the UN agency.

It is important to look at these issues before, under increased autonomy, various republics in the Soviet Union — including Ukraine where Chernobyl is based — go different ways in administering nuclear plants in their territories.

If the IAEA undertakes a thorough evaluation of safety mechanisms in nuclear plants in USSR, its attention should not necessarily remain confined to the Soviet Union. Such power stations or even medical facilities based on radioactive energy exist in all different countries, including Bangladesh. It is important to make sure that all of them observe the safety measures to the fullest degree.

THE COMMONWEALTH GOES TO ZIMBABWE (MEETING OCT 16-22)

Plans will be Laid to Help Build a New South Africa

Derek Ingram writes from Harare

JUST as the 1979 Commonwealth summit in Lusaka marked the end of war in what was then Rhodesia and led to the birth of Zimbabwe, the summit in Harare could herald the birth of a new South Africa.

Zimbabwe became a full member of the Commonwealth in 1980. After South Africa has become fully democratic it will almost certainly return to the Commonwealth it left 20 years ago.

For the first time for a decade the Commonwealth is unlikely to find itself seriously at odds over the South Africa issue. There will still be some lingering differences with Britain about the programme for lifting sanctions, but the bitter arguments of the Eighties with Margaret Thatcher will not be repeated.

The emphasis now will be on the role the Commonwealth should play in the transition years. At the meeting in New Delhi in mid-September of the nine foreign ministers who make up the Commonwealth Committee on Southern Africa renewed offers were made of professional help in the coming negotiations between the parties in South Africa.

These talks to set up a non-racial democratic constitution will almost certainly begin before the end of the year.

Although the violence in the townships has hindered the process, the revelations some weeks ago that the Pretoria

government had been financing Chief Buthe's Inkatha Movement and that its security forces and right wing whites had stirred the troubles has actually helped push the talks nearer.

It was also helpful that all this emerged before, not after, the Harare summit because Commonwealth leaders will discuss recommendations from Delhi for a stage by stage de-escalation of sanctions.

Consular and visa restrictions, cultural and scientific boycotts, restrictions on tourism promotion and the ban on direct air links are being lifted. Some have already gone.

The most effective sanctions of all — those on sporting links — are beginning to disappear. The Commonwealth rules are that as sporting organisations in South Africa become fully non-racial and they are readmitted to their international governing body then the boycott on the sport should be lifted.

Road running, amateur boxing, professional golf, table tennis and cricket have met all the criteria, although Pakistan and the West Indies are still hesitating about letting South Africa return to international cricket in the World Cup next year.

The World Boxing Council has decided not to lift its 16-year boycott and Australia and New Zealand have cancelled next year's Springbok rugby

tours. The South African sporting bodies involved have still not become racially unified.

The stage-by-stage approach will also apply to the other sanctions.

The arms embargo would stay in place. It was decided in Delhi, "until a new post-apartheid government was firmly established with full

democratic control and accountability."

Financial sanctions, including lending by the IMF, should be lifted "only when agreement is reached on the text of a new democratic constitution."

Other economic sanctions, including trade and investment, should be lifted "when appropriate transitional mech-

anisms" are agreed so that all parties can take part in talks.

Sanctions, however incomplete, have been a success. The South Africans have admitted as much and the pressures from the international community will be seen as having been crucial in undermining apartheid and bringing the release of Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of political parties. Only the British will go on arguing that sanctions were a mistake.

When Thatcher took Britain her own way at the Vancouver summit in 1987 it strengthened, not weakened, the Commonwealth as an organisation. Harare will see Britain begin to move back into union in a Commonwealth that the majority in the new South Africa will respect for the stand it took.

All the time the sanctions row has raged the Commonwealth has been stepping up its help to the underprivileged in South Africa as well as continuing its programmes of training for exiles.

The need is huge. The Secretary-General's report reveals that Commonwealth Secretariat researchers found in South Africa no black engineers to more than 26,000 white engineers, 400 black doctors to 25,600 white doctors, and 450 black lawyers to 8,700 white lawyers.

Eighteen countries have offered study and training places

for young South Africans usually on a subsidised or no-fee basis. Six hundred students have had fellowships under a scheme started at the 1985 summit; 3,000 have enrolled in distance learning courses.

Now a study on human resources needs carried out by a Commonwealth group that included black South Africans will put before the Harare summit with plans to prepare Africans to take senior jobs in government.

In the words of the foreign ministers in Delhi, "The creation of a new civil service culture, with specific targets set for advancement of members of the deprived majority to top management positions during the transition period is especially important."

Training will be proposed for top and middle level administration positions, key professional positions in the public and private sectors, non-governmental and community-based organisations as well as teacher training and support for returning exiles and freed political prisoners.

The intention is that the Commonwealth should take the lead in a programme that will have to be supported by the entire international community.

DEREK INGRAM is Editor of Gemini News Service and the author of several books on the Commonwealth.



BA NGLADESH is one of the poorest countries of Third World with a population of 11 crore in an area of 55 thousand square miles. Of the total population, 85 per cent is estimated as living in the villages below the poverty level and 15 per cent in different city and town areas. Of this 15 per cent urban population, roughly 10 per cent is above the poverty level and rest five per cent below and much below the poverty level. And they constitute the slum dwellers; estimate five per cent of the total population i.e. 5.5 millions, and their number is progressively increasing!

In all, 72 per cent of the total population is landless in our country, although the main occupation in the vast countryside is cultivation which requires land as a base to sustain. The very landless and as such poverty-stricken people gradually are pouring in different cities and towns in search of livelihood.

They take shelter in already grown slums in different areas of the cities and towns, which in turn swell with the new influx. It is learnt from the slum dwellers that many of them lost their homesteads and belongings due to erosion of rivers in different parts of the country. Thus they were compelled to leave their ancestral villages for the cities and towns to earn a livelihood as there remained no provision of employment in the villages. It is also learnt from other

groups of slum dwellers that they were once poor agriculturalists and were exploited in various ways by the village chieftains and money lenders who gradually grabbed their landed property and homesteads. Some blame the natural calamities like cyclone, tidal bore, flood, tornado etc. However it is true the number of slum dwellers registered some significant rise following each major natural calamity like cyclone, tidal bore, flood, tornado etc. Thus the number of slum dwellers has increased manifold by now. And with about 6.50 crore landless people in the country and the proposition of natural calamities and their unbridled aftermath remaining static the chances of further increase are strong.

Let us take the case of Dhaka city with its present population of 70 lakh of which 17 lakh are slum dwellers. These 17 lakh poverty-stricken people live in the slums mainly stretched along the railway tracks and the garbage spots. These sites cannot, by any criterion, be deemed fit for human habitation. Yet, these ill-fated human beings cannot but live in an utterly deplorable condition what is much lesser degree of slum condition any where in the world. What we need and are morally commanded to

Rehabilitating Slum Dwellers

by Syed Zinat Ali

think are the ways and means for the mitigation of the pitiful sufferings of the slum dwellers. It is good to know that the present government understandably, has been giving sympathetic attention to the plight of these unfortunate people. In view of the deplorable condition of the slum dwellers, the following suggestions for the alleviation of their sufferings as well as improvement of the environment may be considered.

It is observed that a good number of up-rooted and floating people (families) reside on the roadside on the footpaths under the open sky through days and nights. They are obviously treated as burden of the society and not given any treatment of human beings. Respected dwellers of the city do not allow them a shelter under the staircase of their buildings even in rains and natural calamities. The police personnel also do not allow them to stay on the footpaths as they create 'nuisance and unhealthy atmosphere'. Besides, 'mastans' and local 'musclemen' harass the young girls of the helpless uprooted people. Their pitiable condition hurts your conscience. The cry of the helpless babies pinch the heart of every conscious citizen who has enough

sympathy for them but has no ways and means to help them in matters of rehabilitation in the society. At best the conscious citizens can co-operate with the government to help rehabilitate them. Man is the best creature of God. In a democratic country like ours we have a greater responsibility to help habitat all its people with rights and privileges as enshrined in UN charter.

As the slum dwellers are legal citizens of the country, so they have every right to live as all others. According to the democratic principle the government should usually commit to do the needful towards meeting the basic needs of the slum dwellers. Development, in the true sense of the term can not be achieved if a considerable part of the population is left out to groan in sub-human condition.

The government should undertake a master plan to rehabilitate the slum dwellers of Dhaka city and other towns of the country. Under this master plan the concerned authorities should acquire required lands for residential and industrial purpose in the city town outskirts. The authorities should construct a good number of at least semipucca sheds providing necessary amenities for the rehabilitation of 35

lakh slum dwellers in a well planned manner in the country.

A master plan for the expenditure of say Tk 3000 crore can be made for the rehabilitation of the slum dwellers and the financing of it can be managed in the following ways:

(a) The donating countries and the agencies concerned may be requested to bear the expenditure to the greater extent.

(b) Notwithstanding the help given by the donating countries our government should also collect a fund to meet nearly half of the expenditures of the master plan from our own resources.

(c) The government may take an initiative to pass an ordinance in this regard in the National Assembly.

(d) As per the ordinance the government may impose a special and compulsory tax, as has been made for Jamuna multi-purpose bridge project, to materialise the master plan.

(e) A light tax can also be imposed on the revenue earning of the land.

(f) Zakat money can be reallocated for the humanitarian project.

A Slum Dwellers Trust may be constituted with the initiative of the government in order to rehabilitate the slum dwellers in the government khas lands in a very planned way

so that no slum dwellers are affected in future.

There should be a permanent department or organisation to look after the problems relating to slum dwellers and floating people of the city. Rehabilitation programme can be chalked out after having proper survey and census.

An environment must be created so that the city dwellers can realise the problems that arises out of the slums and floating people in a way that they could voluntarily participate in the programme to overcome the problems facing them.

All the managing committees of the mosques, temples and churches etc. and NGO's functioning in the city areas can easily be associated with the rehabilitation works.

Emphasis should be given on imparting training to slum dwellers in the fields of health, sanitation, literacy, family planning, social welfare and economic activities.

Communication system should be so organised within the radius of say 30 kilometres around the big cities so that the people can commute to the cities daily and return to their places of residence smoothly. This will obviate the population pressure on the cities considerably.

It is hoped that in view of the enormity of the problem government and concerned agencies will come forward to resolve the issue before it becomes much too difficult than at present.

Communication

US Press Fails Proliferation Test

on 241 articles published by six leading US newspapers between January 1990 and February 1991.

The newspapers included The New York Times, the Washington Post, the Christian Science Monitor, the Los Angeles Times, the Boston Globe, and the Wall Street Journal.

News about proliferation issues mushroomed during the Gulf crisis, largely because of the US administration's efforts to persuade the world that Iraq was close to building a nuclear weapon.

Over a 26-month period before early 1989, none of the papers published a single story about the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), the key-stone of international efforts to curb nuclear weapons, says the report.

The US media has not only failed to report the nuclear proliferation issue adequately, it has virtually ignored Third World perspectives on the problem, according to a new study. Jim Lobe of IPS reports from Washington.

Even when US military leaders made little secret of their intent to target Iraq's nuclear facilities, not one article was published about the possible consequences, legality or effectiveness of such an attack, it said.

Almost half of the 241 articles studied by Friedman were opinion pieces or editorials.

Stories on North Korea's nuclear programme, the partial test-ban amendment conference in 1991 in New York,

super-computer sales to Brazil, Israel and India, and the nuclear capabilities of both India and Pakistan during a period of rising tensions between them last year were all broken on the opinion pages, not by staff reporters.

In addition, the contributors were almost entirely made up of Western scholars, experts, and government officials. Of 53 writers, only two offered non-Western perspectives — one from the United

Nations and another written by Iraq's ambassador to the United States.

Similarly, out of a total of 138 news stories which addressed proliferation issues, only 14 originated in developing countries where nuclear programmes are considered far advanced — Pakistan, Iraq, India, Argentina, and Brazil, the report said.

Five stories from Israel focused on the Gulf crisis, mentioning only in passing Israel's own undeclared bomb programme and its possible impact on the regional arms race.

Only one story was written from Vienna, home of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and one other from Geneva, where the UN conference on Disarmament meets regularly and where the fourth NPT review conference

took place last year.

The US media also largely missed or covered belatedly major non-proliferation undertakings in the Third World, particularly the efforts by governments in Argentina and Brazil to halt the nuclear programmes sponsored by their armies, the report said.

The newspapers failed to adequately report Washington's own contribution to the problem, according to the study, in part because of an over-reliance on official sources.

Little was reported about the US Commerce Department's routine approval of export applications for nuclear-related technology to Pakistan and Iraq, for example.

Once the war against Iraq broke out, the press also failed to mention that US attacks on Iraq's nuclear facilities violated the Geneva protocols on the conduct of war, and several IAEA and UN General Assembly resolutions banning such attacks, the most recent passed by a 141-1 margin only one month before Desert Storm.

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.

An austere President

Sir, The Acting President Mr Justice Shahabuddin has just left the high office of President with great dignity, and no fan fare. A simple and austere person, he performed his stupendous tasks quietly and firmly, and has set an extra ordinary example not only for the third world countries which are plagued by instability, unrest and corruption at the top, but also for the devel-

oped countries and the international organisations. Mr Justice Shahabuddin completely detached himself from pettiness and subjective considerations on any issue.

The Acting President has shown the way that in a poverty ridden country like ours, one has to practice austerity, and that pomp, grandeur, etc. are not needed. The priority lies addressing oneself to the work for the myriad problems of the coun-

try. Let all of us, take a lesson from him, and tread the path of simplicity, honesty and integrity.

The Acting President acted swiftly in retiring the two Chiefs of the services when the occasion demanded it. This was possible for him because he was a man of rock-like integrity and unflinching honesty. Similarly when the constitutional process of returning to the parliamentary form of government was being delayed, Mr Justice Shahabuddin addressed the nation on the electronic media, and expedited the urgently needed constitutional process.

A grateful nation will always remember the Acting President for his courage, simplicity, and for taking the right

decisions at the right time, the only 'true guide in life is to do what is right'.

Shahabuddin Mahtab
Honorary Director
Bangladesh Institute of Law
and International Affairs
Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1205

The chief

Sir, Democratic world has appreciated Bangladesh's efforts to practise democracy. The recent referendum on the system of governance despite less-than-expected turnout (below 40%), returned parliamentary system decided by the 330-member legislature for 110 million people of 64 administrative districts. Both the elections to the

parliament and the referendum delivered high democratic spirits following the popular uprising that unseated the 9-year old "tyrannical regime" in late 1990. Now a number of formalities completed since then toward "reinstating democracy" in the country support the administrative motives.

In the process, the new parliament amended the constitution in favor of parliamentary rule and had it validated by a referendum and then elected a president for the republic out of the political nominees. Obviously, the procedure of installing a partisan person as parliamentary president of the state may revive the argument on its status even if the parliamentary gov-

ernment function effectively.

From the progress achieved so far it indicates familiar power game in some Third World countries that are trapped in such a trial-and-error powerplay by the same coterie clung to the state machines.

However, the precedence of franchise exercised lately should rather have the national assembly reconsider the justifications of similar provision for its resolutions to be validated by the electors, since the government is by the people, of the people, and for the people.

M. Rahman
Zila School Road
Mymensingh 2200