

### The Panthapath Lesson

It has been claimed that only one worker died in the Wednesday evening sewerage accident at Panthapath. Although the Fire Service people have called it a day after warring with the mudslide situation for more than eighteen hours and some people associated with the contractors of the storm drainage project have said that all the labourers on the job have been accounted for save one—the dead Siddiqur Rahman of Perojpur —, it would be very wrong to settle for the Thursday casualty figure so early and without further deep probing investigations into the matter. On the other hand it would be downright unethical to unnecessarily sensationalise the disaster as some newspapers have already shown a predisposition for.

We have not an iota of doubt in our minds on two specific points concerning the accident: one, safety requirements were not met by any standards; two, not all workers engaged in the job were specialised tunnel workers. We do not need to be experts or wait for the wisdom that would be bestowed on us by some probe body of sorts, if it at all comes out with a report, to reach such cocksure conclusions. This has been our way with constructions ever so long and this would continue to be so indefinitely into future. No contractor here is fool enough to spend the extra Taka needed to abide by safety regulations or to pay the extra Taka that the specialised worker would justifiably demand. In a strange turn of irony the contractors to the 'box culvert' storm sewer job are not of our own native stock and, as happens with all foreign people and groups and organisations, supposedly the Japanese firm in no time got worldly wise by our standards, — and how can we complain about that? They only fell in line with local norms.

It will take some time before a clear and dependably honest picture will emerge of what indeed happened — and how. But how can one be sure of that? The practice is appointing a probe body after any such disaster which, as we have already said, normally fade into oblivion without giving a report. And what if such a body does report and rebuke and recommend? In the absence of any watchdog organisation or even a vigilant Press, the body's exertions would fail to come to light and be a pressure on the sense of duty of the authority in charge.

If Bangladesh has made any impressive gains in any sector of economic activity — it is undoubtedly in the construction and building area. It is a strange fact that this has been achieved without ever keeping to the international safety norms. If the Panthapath tragedy has any moral that lies in the need for stringent enforcement of safety requirements in all construction and building job and for the contractors and workers' unions and the government to join in an effort to see that safety measures are firmly established as a standard practice in this sector.

Bangladesh, for sheer physical survival's sake, will need to go far into the field of construction. It can hardly keep its prospects flawed in such a vital spot as occupational hazard and safety. Just any man cannot be taken on the jobs that involve hazard and as such warrant specialisation. All men and women engaged in such work must have an overall safety cover worked out by government and, if possible, the unions — a cover which will in the first place give the worker an identity as an individual and a recognition of his or her rights accruing from the nature of the job. Safety can hardly be ensured to any person whose service has not been secured in any manner.

### Sihanouk's Return

The return of Prince Norodom Sihanouk to a tumultuous welcome in Phnom Penh last Thursday marked yet another milestone in the recent, bloody history of Cambodia. Or perhaps, we should say the history of Indo-China, since virtually every event in the region has been linked to others in some way or other.

Sihanouk, who returned as president and not as monarch as in the old, pre-1970 days, epitomises everything that has gone right as well as wrong with this unfortunate nation. His rule between 1941 and 1970 was characterised by rampant corruption, particularly among the Palace high-fliers; his return to Cambodia after the fall of Marshal Lon Nol's military regime in '75 saw him turned into a puppet and an anguished prisoner of the Khmer Rouge, reflecting the state of the country as a whole; and his role as the nominal leader of the anti-Vietnam resistance since 1978, during which he was torn between a desire to see the departure of Hanoi's troops from his homeland, and his efforts to stay free of the suffocating political embrace of China and the United States, again mirrored Cambodia's struggle with itself and with foreign powers continually encroaching on its sovereignty.

The question now is, whether his return at the head of a coalition named the Supreme National Council (SNC), will herald in peace and national reconciliation for Cambodia. There is ample room for optimism as the very fact that bitter rivals, who never had anything but bullets for one another till the other day, have agreed to form a coalition and work to hold elections in 1993, can be taken as a sure sign of better things to come.

However, better things are unlikely to materialise unless all coalition partners can translate this initial display of goodwill into long-term cooperation. First job would be to hold the SNC and the peace-making process alive until elections are held. The major hurdle then will be the attitude of parties that fail to win control in the polls, because that will make or break Cambodia in the medium term. The Khmer Rouge, which is still tainted with the genocide of the late '70s and which has refused to reform itself ideologically or even organisationally, may again prove a difficult element to satisfy. The Khmer Rouge, which has retained its highly-trained and disciplined armed forces, still therefore holds the key to the process. It will be Sihanouk's biggest challenge to pacify the Khmer Rouge and satisfy the requirements for a democratic transformation at the same time. He deserves the best of luck and assistance.

# 'Democracy and Governance' in the Commonwealth

by Dr Gowher Rizvi

SINCE the Lusaka summit in 1979, this is the first time that the Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) met in Africa — the home for nearly a third of the Commonwealth members. It is also for the first time in many years that South Africa has not so completely dominated the agenda and reduced the discussions into a tussle between Britain and the rest of the Commonwealth. Nelson Mandela's presence ensured that any British efforts to lift the sanctions was given a short shrift and the members were able to move on to more urgent and pressing issues.

This was just as well. Since the last CHOGM in Kuala Lumpur two years ago a great many things have happened which has added to the urgency of discussing the future of the Commonwealth and its role into the next century. Many of the familiar landmarks and assumptions on which the international system was based have virtually disappeared. Not only has there been superpower rapprochement and end of the cold war but there have also been revolutionary changes in Europe. One party dictatorship

in many East European countries have disappeared and communism given an unceremonious burial; and even in the Soviet Union not only is communism in retreat but the very Soviet empire is on the verge of crumbling and may turn out to be rotten to the core. Moreover the Gulf war was shown that in the new unipolar world the Third World states have lost their ability to obtain countervailing superpower support. It also confirmed that a Soviet claim to super power status was a hoax and China lived up to its reputation as a paper tiger.

The overthrow of dictators like Ceausescu and Honecker in eastern Europe could not fail to have its resonance in Africa and Asia: nine African heads of state were overthrown in the ten months up to July this year; in South Asia democracy was restored in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan — only in Burma the military dictator continues to defy popular opinion in this region. More heads are likely to roll in the next year or so.

While all this is good news and will be greatly welcomed by the members of the Commonwealth, the end of the

Cold War has also posed some transitional and adjustment problems. With few exceptions the Commonwealth is made up of developing and largely poor countries who for their survival and development have been reliant upon aid and international development assistance. With the end of European schism, Asia, Africa and the Pacific will now have to compete with eastern Europe for aid, investment and trade. Since much of the aid from the superpowers was strategically motivated, the Third World has virtually lost its claim. Moreover the integration of the West European market, despite constant professions to the contrary, will lead to a 'fortress Europe' (at least in the short to medium term) and adversely affect the exports from the developing and newly industrialized countries. Nor is there much hope that economic liberalization will bring the much needed foreign investment — here too the Third World countries will have to compete with eastern Europe.

However, this is no cause for despondence. The impact

of aid on development has hardly been inspiring. Now pushed against the wall, the developing countries will be forced to rethink their strategies, to learn to live within their means, develop regional and South-South cooperation and break away from the straight jacket of policies imposed by the donors.

It is in this context that the decision of the Commonwealth Heads of Government to concentrate on democracy and good governance becomes relevant.

Democracy is not only a desirable end in itself but it is also a means to an end. The half-century experience of frustrated development in the Third World has shown that democracy is an essential pre-condition for development. For far too long the governments have put the horse before the cart by emphasizing economic policies without recognizing the importance of developing the capacity to implement the policies.

The Commonwealth's commitment to 'democracy and governance' should not

just be confined to achieving free popular elections and multi-party system. These are important but they are a small part of the process. They must commit themselves to strengthening of the civil society and the empowerment of the people so that governments actually become accountable to the electorate. Only a government accountable to the people will be sure of achieving the correct priority and allocation of resources, curbing corruption, ensuring the rule of law, guaranteeing freedom of association, of speech, of the press and other fundamental human rights. Only a government accountable to the people can cut back on wasteful military expenditure and devote itself to the development of human resources.

The fact that the Commonwealth has accepted the strengthening of democracy as one of its objectives is a milestone in the history of the organization and will ensure its survival in the next century. But it is important not to confuse democracy and good governance as coterminous with the operation of free-market principles. While there is no

doubt that government intervention in the economy can be counter-productive and distort the allocative mechanism, it does not follow that an imperfect market is better than an imperfect government. In most of the Commonwealth a vast part of the population lives below the poverty line and outside the market operations; and to leave their fate to the unfettered market would be highly undesirable. It is only by empowering the people and creating a civil society that it will be possible to strengthen the political entitlement of those living below the poverty line. Development and growth without distribution is not desirable. Only through political entitlement will the masses have access to the benefits of development. It is for these reasons that the Commonwealth initiative to strengthen democracy and good governance will be welcomed not only in the Commonwealth but throughout the Third World.

The author is a teacher at Nuffield College Oxford.

Extracted from the writer's broadcast on Singapore Radio.

THE Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) is making another bid to integrate the region's economies by setting up a Free Trade Area (FTA) covering all six members.

Economics ministers from Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and Brunei have decided on a 15-year time frame on the FTA, by which time tariffs on manufactured products are to be reduced to five percent or less.

But economic analysts in the region are skeptical of the FTA's success, pointing to the failure of the preferential tariff arrangement (PTA) to encourage trade among the ASEAN countries.

Speaking at the ASEAN economic ministers' meeting here recently, Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad warned that "dismal" economic cooperation within ASEAN threatens its survival as a viable and relevant organisation.

"We seem to lack the political courage needed to move ahead and implement cooperative projects that will benefit us in the long term,"

### ASEAN

## Cooperation only a Pipe-dream?

Mahathir said.

While the economies of all six states are export-driven, individual states' exports to their ASEAN neighbours comprise only about 10 percent of the total external trade of each.

The blame lies in the group's economic success — four of the six are world leaders in the production of rubber, palm oil and timber and significant suppliers of petroleum, cocoa and coconuts.

Four ASEAN members — Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia — have successfully ventured into industrialisation and are moving into heavy and high technology industries.

All six face stiff competition from one another in tourism, and another major revenue earner for the region.

This great similarity in economic make-up is why although the FTA has an im-

pressive list of about 13,000 items for which favoured status is accorded, few of them are for the major products.

ASEAN was created 14 years ago essentially to bind the nations collectively against the threat of communism. The Vietnam war was then proceeding at full steam and all six states were facing communist guerrilla insurgencies.

The association has largely been political in nature but their strong individual economic performance has given the impression that it is also a sturdy economic bloc. This image is becoming tattered.

At this week's meeting of their economic ministers' in the Malaysian capital, five of the six nations were rooting for their own vision of what is good for the group.

The divergence caused the ministers to deliberate late into the evening of their final session and in the end decided to adopt a watered-down version of all five plans.

Besides the FTA proposed by Thailand, there was the East Asia Economic Group (EAEG) proposed by Malaysia as a way of mustering the ASEAN states and the newly industrialising economies of

South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong to form a formidable bloc against the US pioneered North American Free Trade Arrangement (NAFTA) and the single Europe market.

But the proposal has run into opposition from within ASEAN itself, with majority not being in the mood to adopt a confrontational position against their main western trading partners.

The result is the stragulated East Asian Economic Caucus which has no organisational structure nor even a schedule of meetings.

Singapore has been pushing for "Growth Triangles" within ASEAN, the creation of cross-border industrial and economic zones that jointly exploit the assets of member states. But ASEAN countries are loath to turn these triangular arrangements into full-blown regional projects.

A Philippine proposal for an

ASEAN treaty of economic co-operation designed to model ASEAN along the lines of the European Community was also rejected.

A Malaysian government official who was involved in the official discussions said the crux of the problem is that nationalism continues to prevail over regional interests.

He revealed that when the United States offered ASEAN preferential trade benefits similar to those extended to Mexico and the Caribbean, the Asian countries insisted that Washington sign six separate treaties with them. The offer was shelved.

But it is not all bleak news for ASEAN on the economic front. The group has been successful in speaking out with one voice on major international trade and economic issues.

It presented a joint stand at the Uruguay Round of multilateral talks on improving world trade rules and it has jointly worked out trade benefits with the European Community, Japan and other major trading partners.

# Black Cuban Exiles Stand Up to be Counted

Mohamed Hamaludin writes from Miami

LACK Cuban-Americans, often referred to as the invisible people, are trying to step out from behind the tall shadows cast by their white compatriots. And they are very specific about their reasons for doing so.

"Cuba today is a black republic dominated by a minority of so-called whites," says Jose Heredia, president of the Miami-based Association Afro-Cuban, formed two years ago.

Heredia's association plans to join activists in Cuba who are resisting efforts to replace the government of President Fidel Castro with a new leadership drawn almost exclusively from the white exile community.

Afro-Cuban activists in the United States fear that the predominantly white movement of anti-Castro exiles embodied in the right-wing Cuban American National Foundation is gearing up for a takeover of Cuba in the event that the communist government falls. The Foundation has the full support of the Bush administration and enjoys great influence within the US Congress.

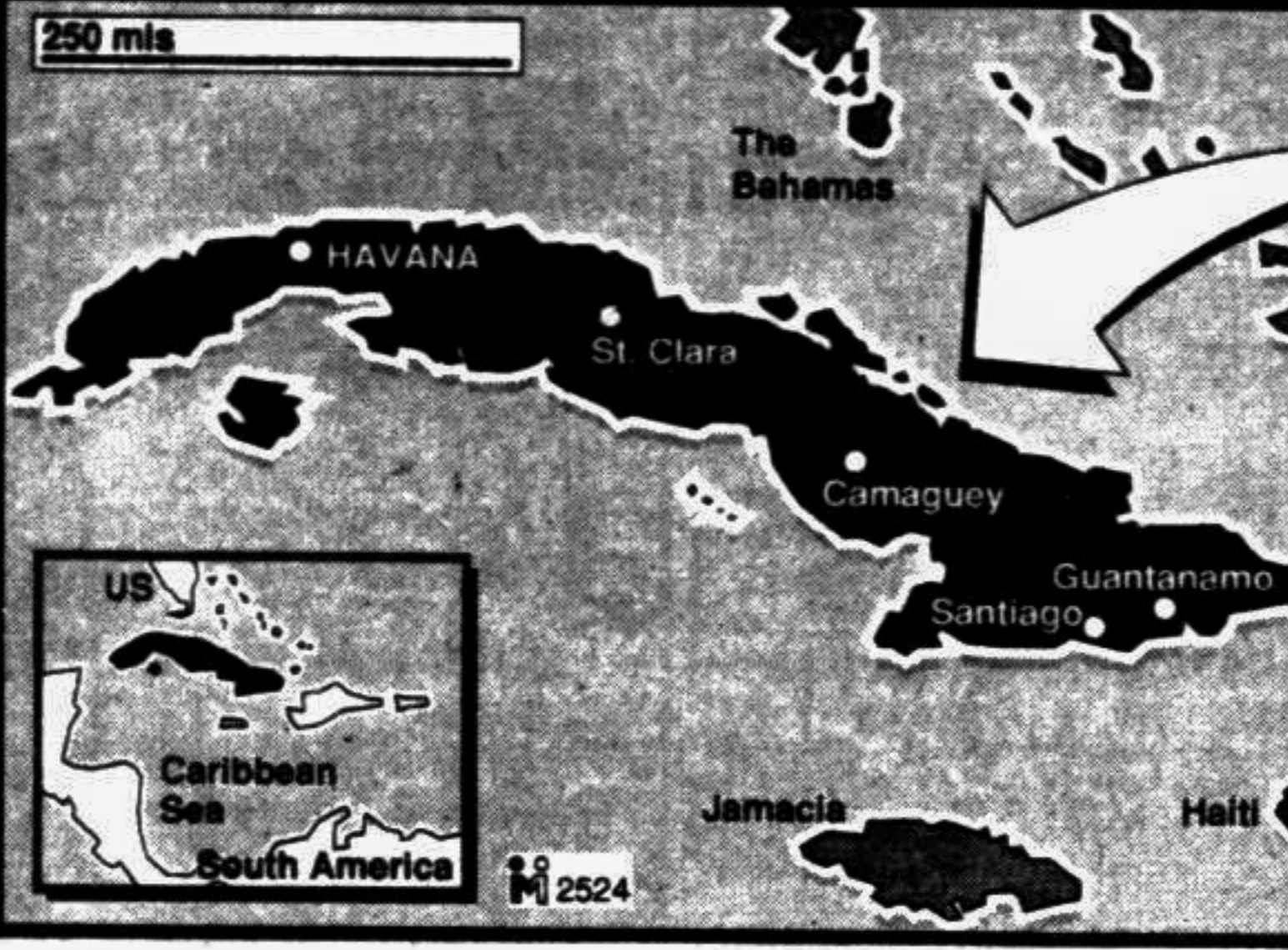
The anxiety of black Cuban Americans is shared by other US activists. Mervyn Dymally, a Trinidad-born congressman from Los Angeles who visited Miami on October 20 to meet with association members, has said he believes the US is planning a Panama-type scenario for Cuba.

The US justified its invasion of Panama in January of 1990 by invoking reports of attacks on American soldiers. Dymally suggests the US may be planning to touch off a similar incident which could justify the use of force against Castro. The revolutionary leader would

then be replaced in Havana by a government dominated by pro-US leaders.

"Transition will come in Cuba," Dymally said. "I believe it will happen with violence but I hope not."

### Origins of Cuban blacks



- Some slave trade to Cuba prior to 1800s
- Slaving by Spanish to colonies like Cuba intensified after 1807 when British quit
- Most Cuban blacks originate in West Africa, particularly Guinea

He also advised them to increase their visibility by arranging meetings in other major US cities. "Not many Americans know that Cuba is a black country," the Congressman said.

Afro-Cubans eagerly took up Dymally's suggestion that they send a delegation to Washington to meet with the US State Department, National Security Council and Organisation of American States.

The day before the Dymally meeting, senior officers of the association also met with Afro-Cuban intellectuals and aca-

demies in Miami and decided to establish a National Committee for Peaceful Transition in Cuba.

Its avowed aims are to defend Cuban sovereignty and ensure that Cuba's problems are resolved domestically. To that end, Afro-Cuban leaders in Miami are believed to be in close touch with their counterparts on the island. Word has it Castro is preparing to appoint an Afro-Cuban to a senior post to give blacks greater visibility and head off the anti-communist movement in Miami.

community leaders claim that about 50,000 are black.

The ancestors of most of Cuba's blacks came to the island as slaves from West Africa after 1807. Over the years they have intermarried widely with Cubans of Spanish origin and Amerindians.

Cultural and linguistic differences pose one barrier to extensive co-operation between Spanish-speaking Cuban and English-speaking US blacks. However, both groups share a common legacy of racial discrimination. Many white Cubans now occupy senior positions in business and politics — including the mayor of Miami, a congresswoman, a district superintendent — while few Afro-Cubans hold important posts.

— GEMINI NEWS

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### OPINION

#### Will the Government Explain?

It is with a sense of utter horror, disgust and shame, that we have been following the news report in the Daily Star, about the arrival and 'relief activities' of two Britons, in Bangladesh.

As a citizen of this country, I am entitled to an explanation from the concerned ministries and the concerned officials, as to what they think they are doing and who, if anybody has given them the right to play about with the dignity and prestige of the country. The two Britons, have been charged with offences of the gravest nature, in their own country and investigation is in progress against them in Britain. In spite of being aware of all their activities, the Bangladesh High Commission in London has thought it fit to grant these two individuals who are being investigated for criminal offences visas to come to Bangladesh. Would the High Commission kindly let the taxpayer — at whose expense they live their affluent lives — know what the criteria is for granting visas to foreigners wishing to visit the country. Are they aware, that Britain would never grant a visa to anybody, with the slightest criminal offence charge against them, to visit Britain? Or do these 'govt.' employees not care for the norms of civilized govts. and countries? And are they willing to grant visas to

anybody, who is willing to come to this country with 10 pound sterling, in the name of relief?

We have read with utter shock and revulsion, that the highest authority of the land has thought it fit to grant an audience to these two people of questionable reputation. Let the authorities in power, please not forget for a moment, that they are the elected representatives of the people, accountable for every action, to the electorate. Would the govt. please give an immediate clarification on the status of these two Britons and on their own activities? And would it please ask the High Commissioner in Britain, to explain his conduct so the public is aware as to exactly what is going on? 'Investigations' and 'govt. enquiries' have a funny way of failing to keep the public informed.

Such blatant disregard for the welfare of the Bangladeshis in Britain and utter disregard towards the prestige of the country, needs to be regarded and viewed with utmost seriousness and urgency. And if it is all a concocted story, as claimed by these two Britons, we would all like to see a govt. rejoinder in the press, with proof, at the earliest.

P. Haque Dhaka

### Enrolment in voters' list

Sir, The authorities concerned are seeking names of those adults whose names have not been enlisted in the electoral list or whose names have been misplaced or wrongly put in areas where they do not reside anymore, etc. The authorities concerned could very well give the address where the citizens are to go or where they can send their names by post instead of simplifying the whole thing in a halfhearted manner asking all to contact the Election Commission office. Where are these offices situated?

Nahasha Karim, Dhaka.

### Crime in Mirpur

Sir, We the residents of Section 2 at Mirpur like to bring to your attention the deteriorating law and order situation in our area. 'Mastans' and criminals (sometimes posing as so-called students) have become so active that residents of Section 2 (especially F Block) are virtually afraid to go out of doors for fear of being hijacked or robbed.

A few days ago, a house in F Block of Section 2 was looted in day time. No body came to any help, not even the police, despite hue and cry by the housewife. A few 'mastans' and criminals came to the house in a microbus, broke open the front door, loaded valuable articles on their vehicle and

### Congratulations to BBC

Sir, BBC Bengali Service deserves our kudos on the occasion of its golden jubilee. BBC Bengali Service has been playing the role of electronic media catalyst for us. Our war of independence and all mass movements against military dictatorship and civil atrocity have been projected or highlighted objectively by BBC. So crores of Bengali speaking listeners do share the victorious and glory of BBC. So once again I extend congratulations to BBC as it ascends to a stratospheric level.

Rathan M Choudhury, East Hazipara, Dhaka-1219.

### Crime in Mirpur

M. A. Sobhan and others, Section 2, Mirpur, Dhaka.