

Yeltsin Takes a Huge Risk on the Market

Charles Quist Adade writes from St. Petersburg

Boris Yeltsin, the President of the Russian Federation, is planning the transition of the economy from state-control to the market. Under a radical economic programme the Russian Federation is to move towards a market economy by the end of 1992. Many Russians fear that rather than solving the massive unemployment and more economic

GO-GETTER Boris Yeltsin marked his 100th day in office in November as the first democratically-elected President of the Russian Federation with two characteristic surprise moves.

First, he launched a radical economic blueprint to rush Russia to the market by the autumn of 1992. Second, he outlawed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in his Russian Federation.

The first move immediately generated much heat. The plan envisaged, among other things

- Defreezing prices, wages and salaries.
- Privatisation of all smaller and selected large-scale state enterprises.
- Abolition of restrictions on all forms of external trade transactions, including barter and hard currency transfers.
- Abolition of import duties on all forms of goods and services, as well as customs duties beginning in the new year.
- Abolition of the official, tourist and other fixed exchange rates of the rouble and setting-up of foreign exchange bureaux to change the rouble at rates to be determined by the Central Bank of Russia.

Thus Yeltsin is preparing shock therapy, as well as assuming the role of a master surgeon ready to carry out a major surgical operation on the seriously ill Russian economy.

He says he will take the burden of responsibility for the success or failure of his programme and has asked parliament to give him extra powers to enable him take "vertical" control of the programme's implementation.

Leading Soviet economists, including the popular Nikolai

Shemelyev, say the one-year target set to complete the transition to a pluralistic, privatised, free-enterprise economy in Russia is over-ambitious. But Yeltsin and his team are optimistic. They refer to neighbouring Poland where, under Lech Walesa, transition to a market economy took less than a year.

Critics contend that the obstacles "in the way to the market" as a result of the "horrendously inefficient and parasitic state bureaucratic,

monopolistic and corruption-ridden" system are too many to be overcome in one year.

The old totalitarian structures are still intact and the hangover of command-and-administer, or what is now termed "parasitic socialism," seems to have dulled the sense of initiative of many Russians. Although the majority are for market reforms — recent polls put the figure at 76 per cent — few are ready to go into private business themselves or to be hired by private business.

Senior Russians are scared of the "wrath" of the market which Communist propaganda taught them means mass unemployment, roof-top prices, spiralling and cyclical inflation, crime waves, and squalor and poverty for the mass of the people.

Former Soviet premiers Nikolai Ryzkov and Valentin Pavlov gave them a foretaste of the "capitalist hell" when their haphazard and half-hearted market measures led to shrinking production and

falling living standards.

Economists cite other impediments that will make Yeltsin's journey to the market painful and slow. These include:

- Far too many firms can be bought only on the levo (Russian for under-the-counter) or at the unofficial and illegal market because shop managers do not put even the premium on the shelf.
- Law makers and enforcers would go for a bribe rather than self-satisfaction.
- Dislocation in the supply network as one republic after another breaks away, taking control of its factories and resources. Many Russian factories and plants get supplies of either raw materials or half-finished or finished parts from other republics.
- Inter-ethnic, inter and intra-republic conflicts, which have also begun to flare within the Russian Federation.
- Growing mafia and racket gangsterism enmeshed with the state bureaucratic machine that has replaced the now-defunct State Planning Committee and controls the economic mechanism through bribe and nepotism. Local administrators demand bribes of 100,000 rubles or the equivalent in hard cash before they register new private business.

Yeltsin's dilemma is exacerbated by the fact most new breed Russian state and private managers have little interest in earning hard cash abroad and in foreign travel.

To all this has to be added the mass of antiquated technology in factories, the inconvertibility of the rouble and lack of qualified and competent business managers, accountants and marketing techniques.

Will Yeltsin have the pa-

tience to contain the tide of possible strike as prices rise and wages go down? Not much, if the promptness with which he tried to crush the recent rebellion in the southern autonomous region of Chechen-Ingusheti is anything to go by.

To forestall national strike, Yeltsin plans huge increases in student stipends and pensions and other social benefits for the under-privileged to cushion the pain.

The 20 million Russians believed jobless after trimming the bloated bureaucracy and firing redundant workers are to be put on the dole. Scaptilies say the already broke Russian government just does not have the funds for this huge social programme.

Hardliners in the disbanded Communist Party say Yeltsin and his "turn-out" advisers are "Not really interested in solving the economic problems of Russia in the best interest of the masses", but "their endeavours are just meant to fill the shop shelves and adorn the republic with all that glitters from the metropolises of capitalism."

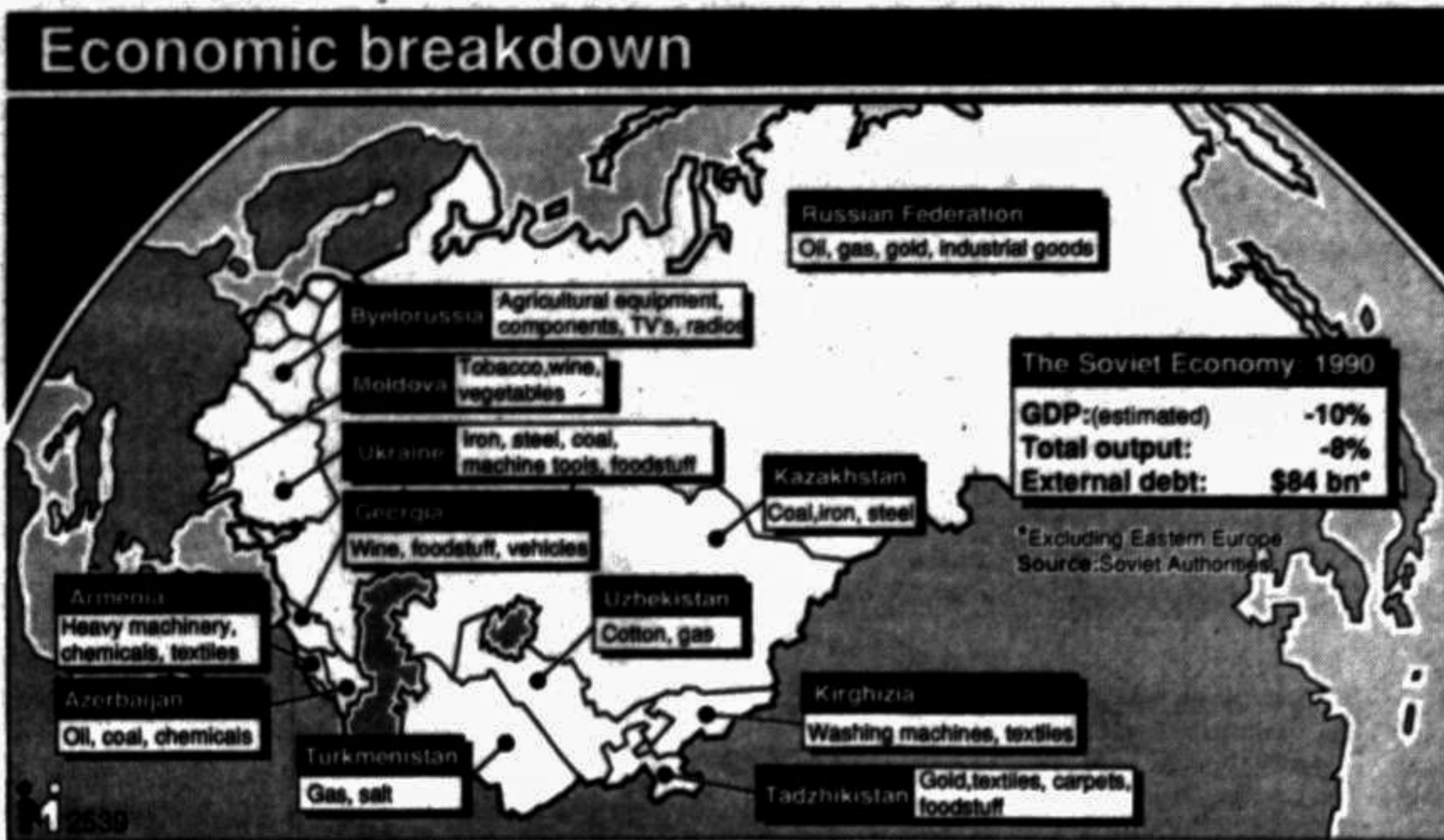
One member of the disgraced party who did not want to be identified said: "Now that Russia's new leaders have embraced the advice of their paymasters in the IMF and the World Bank, Russia will soon be on the road of neo-colonial disaster akin to the fate of African and other Third World countries."

The only choice left for Yeltsin is what he has opted for — radical and comprehensive reforms carried through with singleness of purpose. Tinkering with the old system, as Ryzkov and Pavlov tried to do, would be fruitless.

Most Russians do not want to return to the old system anyway. The failed August coup proved that. But if Yeltsin's reforms do not yield quick results, the prospect of a second putsch cannot be ruled out.

— GEMINI NEWS

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Pacific Islanders Not after Full Freedom from US

Giff Johnson writes from Majuro

MOST Micronesians (like they in Palau or Guam or the Marshall Islands) are not seeking full independence.

In Guam, for example, the people want more autonomy within a relationship with the United States.

American officials feel that Pacific Islanders should not call the US insensitive if, after talking with island governments, the US makes decisions that run counter to what islanders want.

No, the islanders will not call the US insensitive. But they are going to start calling it what it is: colonialism.

And if the Bush administration keeps up its policy of might makes right, it could be surprised by the surfacing of more militant opponents in these Pacific islands.

The Bush administration's policy on self-determination for Pacific island-nations shows it is frustrating genuine self-determination in its own territories. But it will not hesitate to self-righteously bang the drum for self-determination in the former Soviet republics now wanting independence.

The United States has repeatedly and successfully choked off, by whatever means necessary, aspirations for independence in the Western Pacific.

Micronesia's elected leaders established, in 1969, a special commission to negotiate a new political status with the United States. From the outset, island elected leaders on the future status commission were considering a range of alternatives to their UN Trusteeship status, including independence.

Since Washington had been making all decisions of importance under its Trust Territory

administration, island leaders were eager for more autonomy to take control of their nations — which had been ruled by outside powers since the 16th century.

As early as 1972, wrote former US ambassador to the United Nations Donald McLency, "In a not too veiled threat ... the United States let the Micronesians know that the United States strategic requirements would not countenance independence."

In 1973, then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger directed the CIA to study "the possibility of exerting covert influence

of free Association with only two choices on the ballot: the Compact or complete independence.

The US went along assuming that the voters would automatically endorse the Compact. But US officials had miscalculated. Protests flared up from land-owners at Kwajalein, the key US missile testing range.

And then most of the radiation-affected islands followed suit, saying that nuclear test compensation provided by the US was too limited. Suddenly it appeared that the Compact was headed for defeat and that

of free Association with only two choices on the ballot: the Compact or complete independence.

The reaction of the Reagan-Bush administrations was swift. High level Pentagon official Noel Koch said bluntly: "Declaring independence simply isn't an available option to them" under international law.

The chief attorney for the Interior department confirmed the US's long standing policy against self-determination when he said the possibility of independence for the Marshalls was a "fundamental and radical departure" from "self-determination" policies the US has followed since it captured the Marshalls from Japan in World War II.

on key elements of the Micronesian independence movement where necessary to support US strategic objectives."

By 1975, the CIA began paying Micronesians to spy on their fellow leaders, and wire-tapping conversations of the island negotiators at a crucial point in the political status talks. George Bush was head of the CIA when the CIA spying on Micronesians — who were wards of America — was first exposed in 1976.

Later, after the Marshalls had broken off from the Federated states of Micronesia and Palau, President Amatakabua and his spokesman Tony de Brum engineered a brilliant manoeuvre by gaining US State Department approval, in 1982, of a plebiscite on the Compact

of workers' unrest. If this is true, imagine the situation — many garment workers will be out of occupation and the existing unemployment problem will further worsen.

May, I, therefore, request the government to urgently look deep into the matter of our garment industry and solve the problems of the workers on an emergency basis to save this profiteering industry from ruin. The garment industry owners have already experienced heavy loss due to the political instability during the past autocratic regime. If these industries fail to export their products within the stipulated time, no international buyer will accept any consignment, rather they will move to those countries which can supply their order as per commitment.

Meanwhile, I would request our social and political leaders to be a little more patriotic. Let us think for our country and poor people as well. Let for sometime we forget our narrow differences and petty interests. This is time for thinking and working untidely for our own existence and betterment.

M. Zahidul Haque Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka.

To the Editor

'Round Table'

Sir, The Daily Star Media Round Table was a magnificent achievement, the significance of which should not be underrated.

The political maturity displayed by your daily should be an example to those professionally involved in political life but not interested in 'exploiting the ignorant.'

As your editorial of 21st November rightly points out, 'a proper environment' was needed — and provided for a demonstration of 'a commonality of views.'

The Round Table Conference indicates that the political parties should be offered more such opportunities by the more competent sections of the electorate to emerge from behind their rhetoric.

They might learn that they can do themselves a great deal to good.

S. Alam Rashid DOHS Kurmitola, Dhaka.

DU exams: A suggestion

Sir, Due to various political and internal problems the dates of the Dhaka University examinations are invariably postponed or cancelled. This

causes undue hardship to the students. It also gives the impression in public mind that the university is not a place fit for serious study. Very often we, the general students of the university, are subjected to taunts and have to encounter embarrassing questions on the prevailing atmosphere in the university.

However, the session jams which are mainly caused by the postponement of the examinations, can well be avoided by holding the exams during the unscheduled closures. I am confident that the general students would not object to this proposal and would be more than eager to get the exams over with.

I would request the administration to seriously consider this suggestion and help alleviate one of the major problems of the university.

Sharmeen Deptof I. R., DU.

Garment industry

Sir, I understand from allegations of certain person associated with a reputed garment industry that might be a vested quarter is conspiring to destroy the garment business in Bangladesh and transfer this 'prosperity' to some neighbouring countries — on the ground

OPINION

Trapped in the Oldest Profession

Naz Shafiq

In our society there are many people who perceive themselves as leaders of the community and guardians of morality. It is their belief that social and moral behaviour should be guided and even controlled by the narrow doctrines they espouse and any deviation from their perception and ideas of social behaviour is a condemnable act and should be severely punished. Unfortunately, for the society, these people who have little compassion and charity in their heart and understanding of the prevailing social, economic and even human conditions, bring only misery to people who already exist in absolute and inescapable poverty, and sub-human living condition.

The recent incidents in an industrial town near Dhaka where large groups of people tried to forcibly evict women who play a trade known as "the oldest profession in the world" is one of many such incidents that have been staged by these self styled, self appointed guardians of morals of the society. Their operation is neither an outcome of any deep spirituality or real understanding of religious tenets, nor a moral, ethical or righteous act. There is not a trace of kindness, understanding or even human feelings in their acts.

If one truly takes a human interest and tries to understand the circumstances under which these poor souls fell in the trap of the "oldest profession" — it will become sadly evident that these poor girls are not criminals but their real victims of the inequities and injustices of the society. Also, it is not for fun and games they have entered the profession, but only after they have been plundered of even the most basic and fundamental rights of a normal and decent life and livelihood. The truth and reality might be that the people who are being entertained and also possibly making a profit from the labours and toils of these people are some, 'leaders' of the community and their cohorts who show a pious face to the world — and conduct themselves less than humanly in all other activities in life.

The depth of the problem can be understood if someone takes a dispassionate look at the reality of life here. One does not have to have a training in economics, sociology, nutrition or demography to understand the extent of deprivation that prevail in the country. The people who spout morality and ideology from the pulpit and political platform and attend national and international seminars should consider the facts and stark reality behind hard statistics presented here. Even if given 10% error factor in these figures the brutal reality of life here is

unmatched anywhere except possibly in sub-Saharan Africa.

Bangladesh, a small land mass is home to over 115 million people and even after two decades of vigorous family planning the population is still growing at the rate of 2.7% per year. Over 60% of the people are landless and without any applicable skill or trade except the ability to push a cow with a few crude and primitive agricultural implements, the literacy rate is 25%. About 55% of the population are children under 15 and this figure has remained static for two decades. Of these children, less than 10% are in any sort of school — this means every year millions of children enter the work force or are forced to do so without any skill whatsoever.

The average calorie requirement for an adult male is 2600 calories — available in Bangladesh for an adult male is 1500 calories and even less for women and children. The diet is generally poor in protein and many essential minerals and vitamins. Over 50% of the children suffer from severe malnutrition. Diarrhoea, parasites and night blindness is common among rural children. Over 80% of the people have no access to even rudimentary health care.

Over 60% of the people do not have adequate housing, sanitation or pure drinking water. The most common sight in rural areas and city slums is of hundreds of children running around dressed in rags or no clothes at all — with bloated stomach, runny nose and emaciated bodies. If after a heavy downpour one of our city slickers and moral leaders will take the trouble of visiting one of the city slums, he will find an almost indescribable scene of squalor of a foot deep of mud, sewage, dirt and grime amidst which men, women, children, chickens and other assorted animals are co-existing and trying to make a go at life.

To escape rural poverty and starvation, floods of men and women are washed away to urban areas every year after being dislodged from their health and home, in search of living — and when even the men folk do not have a marketable skill except to drive a rickshaw or become a porter in a bazaar, it is too much to expect that women and girls will find suitable employment. With a back-drop like this, it should not surprise or shock anyone if some of these women become a prey and fall victim to the oldest trade in the world — not for fun but for the sheer necessity of survival and to keep body and soul together.

It is too easy to exhort and spout morality when one has a

full belly. Gandhi asked a rhetorical question in the early stage of his political movement: How would God appear to a man who had no food or water for three days and nights? He answered his own question by saying that God would appear to the starving man in a bowl of rice or a pot of water. The situation has not changed, human beings have not changed and instinct for survival remains as strong as ever.

One of the definitions of prostitution in the dictionary is "base or unworthy use, as of talent or ability." By this definition there are worse types of prostitution in our society and all around us. Even a casual observer can easily identify these activities if he wants to find the truth and have the sincerity and honesty or even the courage to call a spade a spade.

By the same definition, there are countless people in our society, well educated, well fed, well dressed and respected members of the community, in all spheres of activities, what they are doing is much worse as holding privileges they abuse their positions to enrich themselves or increase their power or sphere of influence without regard to what harm it may cause to others in the community.

To may, taking of bribes, black marketing, adulterating food items or medicines, harassing people with false cases cause more harm, are more insidious and have more pervasive and harmful effect in the society than prostitution. Many legal minds in the West term prostitution as victimless crime. The other types of anti-social activities mentioned are worse than prostitution and not certainly victimless crimes — and the injury is much more severe and affects whole communities and the nation.

If the moral leaders of our society are so indignant at some of the social ills — they may be urged to widen their horizon and the sphere and field of activity and include areas where gross abuse and corruption take place. They are urged to inveigh against organizations where there is 40% systems loss or offices from where false or fabricated bills are set for calls not made or "gheroa" or made citizens arrest of people wearing neat white uniforms at airports rob travellers, specially poor illiterate labourers of hard earned money or belongings with veiled threats of confiscation of their belongings.

It would be only fair to expect if our "moral leaders" have been able to identify one type of crime or criminals — they should be able to identify the others; and if they can do it and act on it — I say to them: more power to you and congratulations for a deed well done.