

The Biggest Paradox

The career of Mikhail Gorbachev as the second most powerful man on earth is drawing to a close. The biggest paradox of the history of the late 20th century will remain the fact that the man who set Eastern Europe free and delivered the world from fears of a nuclear holocaust by authoring the epilogue to the Cold War saga, is now forced to take his leave without accomplishing the most important of all his tasks. All his other, monumental achievements — establishment of trust in superpower relations, end to imperial rivalry and nuclear tension, democratisation of the Soviet body politic, to cite but a few — were designed to build a Soviet Union that was economically and politically sustainable without overbearing central control, police oppression or self-defeating financial subsidies.

His willingness to allow the various constituent republics of the USSR to choose national leadership meant he had a genuine desire to put substance into the old Leninist slogan of self-determination for the peoples of all the Russias. Under Gorbachev, other political and economic forces grew at the expense of the Communist Party, but he never abandoned or even degraded the party, possibly because he believed it was the only institution — and not the KGB or the army — in the Soviet Union which would be able to push through all the necessary reforms in an orderly and thoughtful manner. For Gorbachev, such a peaceful and indeed, constitutional, transformation, was essential because his primary concern was to hold the USSR together, and not to break it up into million pieces.

The current state of affairs, with the USSR being declared dead by leaders of 11 independent republics without going through any constitutional process, means Gorbachev has failed quite spectacularly in his efforts. The emergence of Boris Yeltsin as the strongman of Russia also casts dark shadows over the prospect of democratisation. In the absence of any genuine democratic institutions such as political parties to replace the communist party, Yeltsin seized his chance to rule virtually as a dictator, through decrees. The situation in other republics is far from clear, and the power vacuum leaves the door open for the emergence of a demagogue or military strongman.

The prevailing uncertainty over military and nuclear forces, the economic crisis, the brewing civil war in Georgia are all pointers to a tragedy that Gorbachev tried to avert but failed because other men, events and emotions overtook him in a headlong rush towards a still-undefined goal.

The reasons for Gorbachev's failures are many, but one question the West, particularly the United States, would do well to ask is whether Gorbachev and his reforms could have been saved had they been forthcoming with the kind of financial aid that was necessary to prevent an economic collapse. It can be argued that, in the end, it was Gorbachev's failure to attract Western aid, after all that he had given up in terms of Soviet power and prestige, that made his position untenable both in the eyes of the communist "hardliners" and Yeltsin's camp-followers. For some curious reason, the West appeared to pile on the pressure on Gorbachev, by demanding more and more economic reforms, without offering any help to cushion the blow that such drastic reforms would have inevitably brought.

But despite his failure, Gorbachev still leaves behind a legacy that can outshine most others this century. The most telling tribute one can pay this great statesman of our times is that, the world will still be in the Gorbachev Era long after the man himself has departed from the scene.

The Sylhet Detente

Tuesday's news from Sylhet was too good to be true. But it was there in cold print and on nothing less than The Daily Star front page. All political parties of the city have joined to agree and pledge that all sectarian political activity would be suspended in the city for a week. This has been designed to calm the wave of persistent violence since December 15 when a follower of a student party was killed in an armed clash — and defuse the tensions that the city was gripped with for over a week.

We welcome the decision as well as the wisdom and intent of restraint and tolerance that it manifests. Nevertheless one would be tempted to keep one's fingers crossed. For do we not know the political parties are indeed against their cadre resorting to violence in season and out of season — and yet violence is continued by the selfsame cadre which are retained by the parties even after they had perpetrated the crimes? The lesson from a closer arena of armed engagements — Dhaka University — is that the parties can neither give up their hordes of murderers nor can they control them. Will the Sylhet parties be able to pull off something that the party central organisations have either failed to do or did not care enough to do?

There are, however, enough reason why they can hit success. A district town is a close-knit community living together for ages — which does not apply to the Dhaka or Chittagong University situation. And the bullies there should be more amenable to the pressure of the elders who are present on the scene — in fact most of them live with them. In the case of the Dhaka University the so many residential halls make a world of difference.

One very good antecedent should encourage us to expect that the Sylhet 'detente' would work. It must be given to Sheikh Hasina Wajed the full credit for unilaterally declaring a suspension for two months of all BCL activity inside the university campus. Her action came on October 30 — three days after the worst campus battle at DU. Sceptics outnumbered those who saw wisdom and goodwill in the action. It would be unjust not to record that — with only five days to go for the suspension to run out, BCL has virtually been non-existent at DU and no mentionable head-on clashes occurred between the two worrying groups during this period.

In Sylhet BNP, AL and the other parties have gone one step further. They have suspended all political activity. How we hope it works!

There is, however, a bad-tasting moral to the good tidings from Sylhet. Political activity has been, perhaps unwittingly equated with violence — stop the former, the latter will cease. Act of violence should be taken for what it is worth — crime. And dealt with as such — without involving politics. This, unfortunately, is not a workable approach anywhere in Bangladesh now. This social affliction should be corrected by concerted action of all the parties.

The UN Needs Restructuring and More Democracy

Exit of Soviet Union Creates Opportunity

by Muslehuddin Ahmad

THE use of the UN has recently been erratic. It suddenly became extremely important during the Gulf crisis when the US and its allies intervened and liberated Kuwait in the name of UN. However, immediately after the Gulf war the UN again became useless in the affairs of the same region — the Middle-East Peace Conference where it was asked to sit only as an observer because Israel refused to accept any UN role in the Conference though the Conference itself was based on UN resolution 242 and 338. This sort of switch-on and switch-off use of the world body by some countries of the world only reflects its helplessness in dealing with the world affairs. Under such circumstances, one wonders what decisive role it can play in the world affairs under President Bush's "New World Order". However, the US may not be totally responsible for this state of affairs; it is probably taking advantage of the age-old UN system.

Responsibilities of Members

After its inception at the end of the World War II, the allied powers probably needed to use the veto in the UN system because of the chaotic post-war world order created by Nazi-Germany. But the world has since changed and changed beyond imagination. Now the UN consists of 166 sovereign member states which are fully aware of their global responsibilities — their responsibilities towards world peace and security. The exceptions are there and

combined actions are needed to tackle them. It is no longer possible and certainly not desirable for one or only a few countries to take charge of the world affairs. The world is too large and the responsibilities too heavy and diverse — let all sovereign countries combine their efforts for peace, security and welfare of the globe. This is what should be the essential ingredient of President Bush's New World Order where everybody should participate in the protection of human rights and promotion of human values.

With the collapse of communism the ideological war is almost over. Now there is a need for total rethinking in the arena of global political co-operation and complete overhaul of the global system spreading the responsibilities over the sovereign states equitably. The US and the allies may fight one or two wars and win them but it can not fight the wrongs everywhere — there are too many of them.

Veto System

The most democratic thing in the UN is its veto system in the Security Council and this is unfortunately used by many of the most democratic countries of the world. This is not only undemocratic but also counterproductive and at times creates serious animosities among states.

Even without the veto the US and for that matter the other veto-powers, if they stay as permanent members, can remain powerful in the Security Council. The world is fully aware of the political, military and economic

strengths of the veto-powers. They do not have to prove it by using veto. In any Security Council decision, if the present veto-powers which may remain as the permanent members take one view, the other members of the security Council will surely weigh it most seriously which may help secure majority or even qualified majority for the purpose. If the veto system is dispensed with the atmosphere in the UN will change and indeed the respect for the views of the permanent members will enhance considerably.

Permanent Seat

The collapse of the Soviet Union also warrants change in the system of permanent membership and the use of veto power in the Security Council. It would create a bad precedent if one of the Republics, Russian Federation, is taken as the successor state and given the permanent seat in the Security Council with veto power in place of the Soviet Union. Naturally the question arises under what criteria and rules of the UN one Republic, even if it is recognised by all the countries of the world which is not the case yet, can be admitted as permanent member of the Security Council. If Soviet Union is finally dead then as far as the Security Council is concerned it should be left with only four permanent members and it should be up to the UN General Assembly to take a final decision in the matter keeping in view the provisions of the UN Charter.

As Russian Federation is not the successor state of the Soviet Union the question of its new membership in the UN and its Security Council must be dealt with according to the UN Charter. Russian Federation as an independent state is welcome to the UN but the rules must be followed. If the nuclear criterion size, population or even economic strength should determine the permanent membership, then other Republics of the Soviet Union and also some other UN members may bid for it. This will create a dangerous precedent. Therefore, let the cessation of the membership of the Soviet Union, which seems only hours away, be the occasion for the UN General Assembly to re-examine all the issues of permanent membership and the veto system keeping in view the changed world situation.

Expansion of Security Council

As the UN membership is very large and it is ever expanding, it is high time to increase the membership of the Security Council to at least 30 with the present permanent members without veto-power. This will reflect proper representation of the total UN membership. The present system of election of the non-permanent members may continue. The Security Council should generally work on the basis of consensus or simple majority but with provision for qualified majority only on critical and sensitive issues, if necessary introducing graded

voting system on set criteria only on such matters.

Subscription Basis

Once the veto is dispensed with the structure of the UN subscriptions should also undergo modification. It is wrong to ask one country to pay one quarter of the UN budget. However, as the US is big population-wise and economically strong and as also the US enjoys some benefits because of the location of the UN Headquarters, it may be asked to pay higher than others. But others must bear the burden on an equitable basis — the economically powerful countries should bear the larger burden as they play larger role in the UN probably by necessity and also undoubtedly by their own choice. The UN General Assembly may look into these aspects seriously and decide to appoint a special committee to examine the system and come up with a new formula.

While working in Geneva in UNCTAD some years ago as my country's representative, one representative of a permanent member of the UN told me that a country with one million population and paying very little to the UN budget cannot have the same voting right as another with 250 m population and paying a very large sum to the UN. The very attitude goes against cooperative spirit of the UN. If a country with 1 m population is accepted as a sovereign state member of the UN, then its views in the world affairs must be allowed to be duly reflected. Any big power having big concern about the world affairs is al-

ways allowed bigger role and that is possible even without the veto-power.

Size of Bureaucracy

The other most important aspect is the giant size of the UN bureaucracy. People say one third of the UN employees do not work — another one third want to work but are not allowed to work and only one third of them work. This leads one to suggest that the first one third should go and this will reduce the burden on the UN budget considerably. Let the UN General Assembly look into the matter seriously along with the salary structure which has rightly been under US criticism for long time. The new UN Secretary General would be well advised to re-examine all these issues including the question of increasing the number of the Deputy Secretary General. Top heavy administration is generally unproductive. Better course would be to decentralise the power and authority as far as possible and make the directors and officers below more responsible and accountable. More powers should also be given to the heads of the regional and country offices. The new Secretary General, being an outsider and a seasoned politician, should be in a position to see things in wider and proper perspective and take all possible steps to revitalise the UN and make it more responsive to the world needs.

The author is former Secretary and Ambassador and a regular contributor of the column "Spotlight on Middle East" to The Daily Star.

Rebel Army Could Sabotage Democratic Reforms

by Julian Lahai Samboma

Mass protests, a deepening economic crisis, renewed ethnic rivalries and an invasion by rebels from next-door Liberia have combined to persuade Sierra Leonean strongman General Saidu Momoh to open the door to multi-party elections. Mass defections from his party suggest its fortunes are waning. But, the guerrillas, who are backed by Liberian rebel leader Charles Taylor, could threaten next year's scheduled elections.

Sierra Leone



rivalry — which Stevens, despite his faults, had all but eliminated — and an invasion of Sierra Leone by Liberian-based rebels last March.

Momoh, a former military chief catapulted into the leadership of both party and country by Stevens in 1985, has already expelled 15 prominent APC members for "undermining" the party.

Shortly after the expulsions, three ministers resigned, forcing Momoh to shuffle his cabinet. If these own-goals are anything to go by, APC members cannot dissociate themselves from the party fast enough.

As they leave, former APC stalwarts are regrouping to form new political organisations.

One alarming aspect of these political developments is

the dearth of new-breed politicians. The overwhelming majority of politicians who have thrown their hats into the ring are old hands, often discredited as corrupt and opportunistic.

Another disturbing development has been the exploitation of latent ethnic rivalries by unscrupulous politicians. The Ekutay "social club" of Momoh's northern Limba ethnic group, which requires that one be a Limba to join, has gained prominence in recent months. Another "social club," the Temne National Union, was formed recently to "safeguard the interests of the Temne, who account for 30 per cent of the population."

One leading light of the Temne union is multi-millionaire businessman Paul Kamara, who, it is said, has been hand-

picked by Momoh as a vice-presidential running mate. Some northerners defend such unabashedly ethnic-based organisations by saying that "everybody knows that the SLPP is the southerners' party."

Though multi-party elections are scheduled for October or November of next year, no one can say for certain whether they will take place at all, since large chunks of the country's eastern and southern provinces are still occupied by anti-government rebels. As long as they remain, it is inconceivable that elections could be held in those areas.

An allied force of Sierra Leonean, Guinean and Liberian-refugee troops has proved unable to dislodge the

rebels, members of Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front, who are backed by the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, led by Charles Taylor.

In September the allied troops seized from the rebels the strategic Mano River Bridge on the Sierra Leone-Liberia border. But in the following month, the guerrillas recaptured the bridge and have held it ever since. Some 150,000 refugees have fled the fighting by crossing the border into Guinea.

With the economy tottering towards collapse, workers and students have staged several strikes to protest against harsh economic conditions. By early November, schools and colleges had yet to reopen follow-

ing summer holidays. Teachers are refusing to return to work unless their wages, already several months in arrears, are paid.

College students are also refusing to return to class unless the government reduces their fees. The APC government is beset with criticism from all sides.

Since a decisive military defeat of the rebels is nowhere in sight, the only hope for peace — and prompt multi-party elections — in Sierra Leone is if Charles Taylor's support for Sankoh's forces can be neutralised.

This may be too much to hope for, given Taylor's record of scuppering all the peace initiatives brokered by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Like their Liberian neighbours, the people of Sierra Leone appear to have become the hostages of Charles Taylor.

— GEMINI NEWS
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OPINION

Manpower and Kuwait

Reference to an article appeared in The Daily Star on December 10, that the Government decision risks 1,00,000 jobs in Kuwait is partly correct. Actually such decision risks over 5,00,000 jobs in Kuwait. There are about two lakh Kuwaiti families and over one lakh expatriate families in Kuwait. Each family needs at least two house-maids, one driver and one male helper. Besides this, Kuwait employed over one million workers from Bangladesh and other countries before the war. After the war nearly half a million Palestinians left Kuwait creating more job opportunities. In our estimation, Kuwait could require over 1.5 million workers in 2-3 years time. Since Bangladeshi workers are cheaper, easy to control, and also because Bangladeshi workers pay cost of one way air ticket, minimum five lakh workers from Bangladesh could get employment in Kuwait. To procure employment contract numerous recruiting companies from Bangladesh visit Kuwait and call on prospective employers. Since it is a competitive market, almost all Bangladeshi recruiting companies offer one way air ticket and most of the time offer commission to the managers of the employers or the brokers who are friendly with the employers.

We found that most of the employers do not want to re-employ the old workers because they are not willing to pay higher wages that were existing before the Gulf war. We understand that at the request of our Prime Minister the Kuwait Embassy is insisting the local recruiting companies to recruit the repatriated workers. On the other hand the repatriated workers are not agreeable to accept the

present salary scales and not willing to pay air ticket cost and other expenses. In this situation, how the Government or the Embassy could expect recruiting companies to solve this impossible task? It is the Kuwaiti Government who should pressure Kuwait employers to take back the repatriated workers.

By not issuing visas by Kuwait Embassy to new job seekers whose NOC's have already arrived, we fail to understand, what they are going to achieve? NOC's are issued in the name of particular person against his particular passport number and it is not possible to change these NOC's in favour of any other repatriated workers. One should take into consideration the fact that these NOC's could be arranged after three to six months of persistent efforts of the recruiting companies. By stopping visas not only the job seekers and recruiting companies will suffer, but the real danger is that the employers in Kuwait will divert their recruitment to other countries where there is no such restriction. We would ask the Government to issue a clear cut policy on Kuwait so that, if necessary, we stop our marketing efforts in Kuwait and concentrate on other countries. We have seen that interference in any commercial activity by the Government, on most occasions, create more problems and give negative results.

Let the Ministry of Labour and Manpower, Government controlled recruiting company BOESCL and Bangladesh Embassy in Kuwait try full one year to secure recruitment orders for 10,000 workers from private employers without paying air ticket and commission, they may not be

successful. The fact is only private recruiting companies can secure big orders. But it is not true that recruiting companies are making big profit. There are real expenses per head such as air ticket Tk. 22,500; advance tax Tk. 500 to 750; travel tax etc. at airport Tk. 2,000; visa fee Tk. 550; overhead expenses, office rent, staff salary, fax, telephone etc. Tk. 3,000; travelling marketing expenses Tk. 3,000 and the commissions ranging from Tk. 12,000 to 16,000. Hardly we can make Tk. 3,000 profit per head. No recruiting company charges a worker more than Tk. 48 to 50 thousands for Kuwait. Workers might have paid Tk. 60 thousand or so to village brokers or some relatives, whom they trust, months ago, before coming to us — how can we stop that? The Government may investigate and find out the truth and see practically what a recruiting company has to undergo to get an order, beginning from licence, marketing, recruitment permission, selection of workers, collecting money, NOC, medical, visa stamping, departure clearance, air ticket, etc. — everywhere 'bukhshish', bottlenecks, request/threats followed by collection of donations!

The genuine big companies are desperately trying to bail out of this business. If more and more hurdles are created, our exit will be quicker and the allegedly cheat-oriented small-time companies will take over and the Ministry of Labour and Manpower will not be able to earn so much foreign exchange from manpower export (now the second largest foreign exchange earner).

AKM Mujibul Hoque
Former member of Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies, Dhaka.

To the Editor...

Market forces

Sir, No regulations can ignore the market forces at work at any point of time. The point was brought out in Star report on the smuggling of foreign cigarettes into the country.

The price differential is a very important factor in patronising local products. The local levy on cigarettes is almost three times the cost of production. The figures for the last two decades show how excise levies on cigarettes have been increased practically every year, or every other year.

The reason is not far to seek. Smoking had been considered to be a non-essential and/or luxury item; and corrupt regimes found it a ready source to tap more revenue at repeated short intervals, ignoring the purchasing power of the consumers. Even non-corrupt regimes applied this punishment on the smokers in a dictatorial manner — as I find from thirty years of smoking — without declaring smoking as illegal, and the smokers as criminals. It is an insult to one's self-respect, and ruth-

less exploitation of the smoking citizens.

I demand, as a citizen, that the local taxes on local cigarettes be refixed proportionate to the earning power, so that the price differential with the smuggled cigarettes is high. Smuggling cannot be brought to zero level at one stroke.

A smoker,
Dhaka.

'Chartered ship for Haj'

Sir, We fully agree with the views published in the column of your newspaper under above caption on Nov 15 last urging upon the government to negotiate and charter foreign passenger ships for ensuring Haj. To do so, ample time is still available. The government policy on Haj declared of late has frustrated the middle and upper middle class people of the country because the cost to be incurred for Haj is beyond the reach of them. For a travel by air from Dhaka to Jeddah and back, a Bangladeshi Hajj needs to pay around Tk. 43 thousand

excluding tax, duty etc. But if the journey is arranged by a ship, it will undoubtedly reduce the cost by 40% to 50%. Thus it becomes within the reach of a common man. So our neighbouring countries like India, Pakistan and also for off countries Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia etc. arrange the journey by ship for the Haj.

During Shaheed Ziaur Rahman's tenure, the journey by a ship for Haj for the first time was arranged. But after his demise, no genuine attempt is made to arrange journey by ship. Bangladesh is the poorest OIC country with a first growing population. So it is the duty of the government to help Haj costs within the capacity of upper middle class people. Our Embassies in the concerned countries where chartered ships are available may be used and OIC Secretariate particularly Saudi Arabian Government may be urged for necessary information and negotiation for chartering a passenger ship.

A citizen,
Dhaka.