

### And Now the Solution

At a seminar organised by the Lions Club of Dhaka last Thursday, Commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, M Ashraf Huda and Deputy Commissioner of Police (Traffic), Kazi Nazrul Islam identified the following factors as the main contributors to road accidents and traffic jams: lack of knowledge about traffic rules, poor conditions of roads and vehicles, untrained drivers, and rickshaws.

As professionals with the responsibility to maintain public safety on the roads, the two officers are more aware of the problems facing the city's suffering millions than anybody else. But the problems or the causes behind the city's atrocious traffic conditions are probably already known to most citizens who bother to spend a little time worrying about them. What we need, and indeed expect from professionals paid by the taxpayers is not re-identification of old problems, but solutions to them.

Most disheartening perhaps was the officers' apparent unwillingness to address the issue from their own end of the field. In other words, if rules related to traffic movement and road-worthiness of vehicles are not being observed, then should we not assume that they are not being enforced either? If that is the case, then who really is responsible for this state of affairs, by virtue of allowing this flouting of rules to go on unchecked?

Since the top strata of the police force is clearly aware of the issues involved, we can expect action to start from where it is most urgently needed: with individual policemen and officers who regulate traffic. It is apparent to many people that, not only do traffic policemen fail to enforce even the simplest of rules such as the one dealing with parking on zebra crossings, they are often ignorant of rules regarding zebra crossings themselves. As a result, rickshaws and other vehicles regularly ignore the white lines, making life for pedestrians quite hazardous. Before the public is subjected to any lecture on civic responsibilities, the police administration would do well to educate their own men and officers on the understanding and implementation of rules and laws governing urban life. That would be the right place to start, because until road users are made aware, through enforcement of such rules, they are most unlikely to follow them.

The police should concentrate on making the numerous cross-roads and junctions jam-free as a first step. Whatever else that happens on the road pales into insignificance compared to the free-for-all at junctions, where nobody, including policemen, seems to have any idea about what is going on. The chaos is compounded by the existence of bus-stops close to junctions, multiple-parking by vehicles and tendency among bus-drivers to slow-down or simply stop dead at unauthorised places to pick or unload passengers. If the traffic police succeeds in untying the knots at these bottlenecks, then we can expect a major improvement in traffic movement throughout the city's road network.

But, while the sheer number of rickshaws and the woeful lack of knowledge about regulations are certainly major worries, it has to be borne in mind that rickshaws rarely kill people. Buses and trucks with mechanical faults or maniacal drivers are invariably the cause of fatal accidents, and also the worst pollutants along with auto-rickshaws. Dangerous driving and unroadworthy vehicles are both serious hazards to which the police seem quite oblivious at present. This indifference needs to end soon if we are to feel safe on the road, and if the lectures given by police officers to the public in general are to be taken seriously.

### Oscar for Ray

Satyajit Ray, a versatile genius, most notable for film-making, has been awarded the prestigious honorary Oscar. Ray will be the first Asian film director to receive this coveted prize for his rich contribution to the world of film. He is an abiding love affair with the silver screen. Throughout his illustrious career, the septuagenarian film director surprised his critics and gained the admiration of millions by making one superb film after another.

Ever since he made the film "Pather Panchali" based on the novel of Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyaya, Ray has always kept his vision clear about what kind of films he wanted to produce. He, therefore, never bothered to venture into the world of commercial film-making. Highly praised, the "Pather Panchali" brought him international acclaim and recognition at the very first attempt. During his illustrious career he has received more international prizes than any director in South Asia — perhaps Asia. If anyone really compares with him favourably, it is Japan's Kurosawa.

But prizes are not the real measure of the man who set a new trend for Bengali films. His classic style and treatment has sometimes been thought to go over the head of the average film-goers, but the artistic appeal of his work could not be missed by the film connoisseurs as well as the common viewers. That in fact is the enduring spirit of his films which he fiercely defends through the special quality of his work. The most surprising element in his films is that he delineates his story with stark reality but never does he surrender that artistic approach and appeal.

Ray's pioneering role in the Bengali film also concerns developing taste — one that is more sophisticated — among the viewers. It is due to Ray's pioneering role that a new generation of film makers have come up fast inspired by his special way of looking at films. The honour bestowed upon this towering personality of the Bengali film world, will no doubt have a beneficial influence on the Bengali film makers in general and inspire them to work towards further improving the quality of Bengali films.

"WHERE do I live now? Who am I? A citizen of which country?" Oleg Gorbuch, 25-year-old driver asks the questions rhetorically and does not know the answers. A brief pause, and then he replies with touch of irony and wry laughter: "I belong to a lost generation. I'm a citizen of no country."

For the next few weeks, perhaps months, the 280 million inhabitants of one-sixth of the world's territory may remain citizens. Presidents of three of the four largest republics of the fast disintegrating country have hammered out of existence the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, denouncing Lenin's Union Pact of 1922. In its place they have formed the yet-to-be-clearly-defined Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

It was done in a huge hurry. Presidents Boris Yeltsin, Stanislav Shushkevich and Leonid Kravchuk — leaders of the Slavic republics of Russia, Byelorussia and the Ukraine respectively — met suddenly in Minsk, the Byelorussian capital days after economically significant Ukraine had opted to break away in a referendum on December 1. They wanted to checkmate a fatal collapse of the Russian Empire.

It was a panic move initiated by Yeltsin, observers here say, to forestall repetition of the "Yugoslavian scenario." In the so-called Minsk Declaration the Slavic leaders said CIS was open to the other republics. It called for, among other things, a common political strategy, a single economic and monetary unit, banking and tax system and other financial reforms.

In their statement, the signatories blamed the "short-sighted politics of the Centre" for the political and economic crises, and the impasse over talks on President Mikhail Gorbachev's still-born Union of

# How Yeltsin Upstaged Gorbachev to Form his Commonwealth

Charles Quest Adade writes from St. Petersburg

The end of the Soviet Union came before December 31. Creation of a Commonwealth of Independent States has finally killed the state born out of the Great October Revolution. Boris Yeltsin is in charge. More than 70 years on, what was so recently a superpower, is tottering on the brink of economic disaster. Gemini News Service reports on one of the most epoch-making events of the 20th Century.

### Sovereign States (USSR)

A union of republics without the Kremlin in the "optimal form for their survival," they declared. It explained why the Minsk Declaration was organised behind Gorbachev's back.

Parliaments in the three Slavic republics ratified the Minsk Declaration, although Ukrainian legislators demanded some amendments to the draft. Opinion polls carried out in Russia, the Ukraine and

Byelorussia indicated that more than 50 per cent people approves of the CIS.

Roskiyaya Gazeta newspaper gave these "fear-inducing" factors responsible for CIS: destruction of the existing horizontal economic ties between republics responsible for fall in production; the issue of the control of nuclear weapons stationed in Russia, the Ukraine and Byelorussia and Kazakhstan, the spectre of so-

called "Croatianisation" of the Soviet Union with similar bloody consequences; and possible rebellion in the Soviet armed forces.

Yeltsin also feared that the democrats might lose the people's trust if their economic reforms backfired. Yeltsin knew full well that economic reforms in Russia were impossible without the Ukraine, given its economic clout and close economic links with

Moscow.

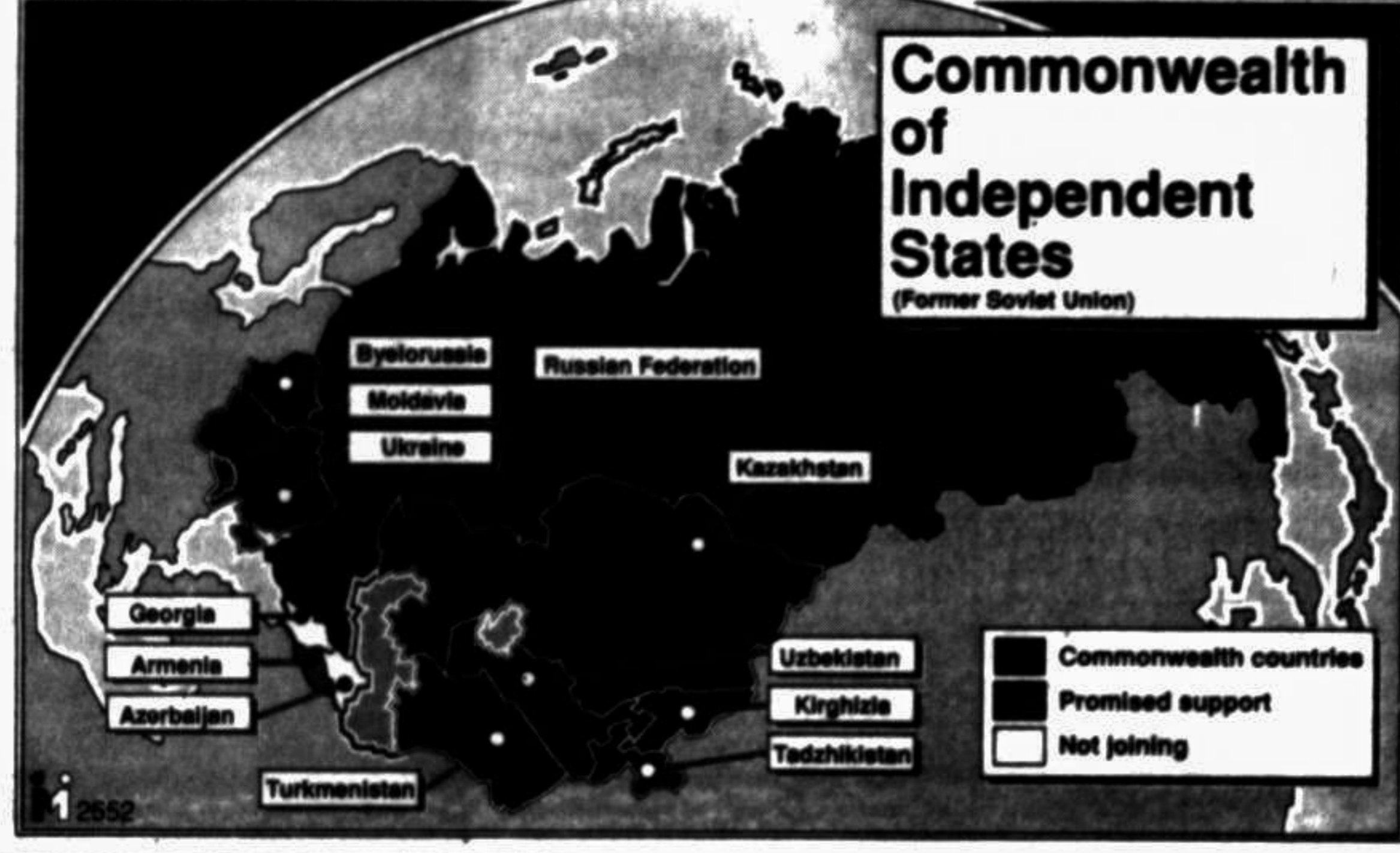
He said on Ukraine's declaration of independence that he would not fancy the existence of Russia without the Ukraine. After the Minsk Declaration he told Russian Federation parliamentarians that "after August the disintegration of the USSR reached its final state."

When Gorbachev warned of the catastrophic consequences of the CIS he was not alone. Some members of the Soviet Parliament called the Minsk Declaration a "conspiracy" and demanded an extraordinary session of the Congress of People's Deputies and set about collecting signatures for such a meeting.

Meanwhile, nearly all the Central Asian republics have agreed to join the Commonwealth, making nonsense of speculation that the non-Slavic republics, including Nursultan Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan, might form a union of Muslim states to counteract Slavic "hegemony and destabilisation."

It is now becoming obvious that Gorbachev's tactics of steering a middle course throughout the past six Perestroika years pleased neither the left nor the right in the political-ideological spectrum.

When the right, supported



# An Ambitious Environment Policy for France

by Pierre-Albert Lambert

Among the major concerns of the French, the state of the environment comes in second place after employment. Two thirds of French people say they are ready to accept an increase in the taxation devoted to improving the living environment.

THIS fact, resulting from a recent official enquiry, has led the public authorities to make the Environment one of their top priorities. So, this year, which is marked by the implementation of a big "National Plan" devoted to it, the budget of the ministry concerned has benefited from an increase of 48.2% over that of 1990.

This effort in favour of the environment is expected to increase further in the coming years for, as Prime Minister Edith Cresson declared last June, France intends to have an "ambitious policy" in this matter.

In 1990, the total spending allocated by France for the environment amounted to 110 billion francs. In 1995, it will be over 151 billion francs and by the year 2,000, it will reach 197 billion. Spending on the environment will thus almost have doubled in the space of ten years.

The aim is to increase the amount of public and private spending on the environment until it represents 1.9 of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), compared with 0.9% today. This is the level of spending that the United States had attained 20 years ago, and West Germany in 1990.

A financial effort is thus being made, but also a human one. In 1995, the Ministry will

have 3,300 civil servants, whereas there had only been about a thousand in 1990. Similarly, the number of environment-related jobs, in both the public and private sectors, which, in 1988, were estimated at 353,000, that is 1.6% of the active working population, is expected to double by the end of the century.

The areas of the environment that the French feel most strongly about and which, according to them, the public authorities should tackle first of all are, in order: Fighting water pollution in rivers and lakes (43%), industrial waste disposal (42%), nuclear safety (39%), reducing air and atmospheric pollution (34%), protecting the coastline (25%), protecting wild plants and animals (24%), protecting mountains (20%), and, lastly, fighting noise (16%).

### Fighting Harmful Discharge

Compared with other developed countries, after a good start France has fallen considerably behind in defending the "capital of nature", and, if there are no "catastrophic" sit-

uations in France, experts consider that there are, nevertheless, "serious risks". They describe the ecological balance-sheet of the last few years as "mediocre overall".

The first reason is the growth that France entered upon in the mid-80s. Here are two examples: For the first time since the oil crisis of 1973, emissions of sulphur dioxide, which are the cause of acid rain, increased by 10% in one year (1989 figures). Road traffic on motorways increased by 50% between 1986 and 1988 and forecasters predict that, by the year 2,005, air traffic will double and there will also be a considerable increase in road traffic. Such a development, will, naturally, be accompanied by an augmentation in pollution.

Yet, the French (and the Japanese) can consider themselves lucky in this last area as their emission of CO<sub>2</sub> is relatively restricted compared with that in other industrialised countries. Expressed in tonnes of carbon per year and per inhabitant, the following comparison can be established: France and Japan: 1.9, the

United Kingdom: 2.8, West Germany: 3.2, Eastern Europe: nearly 4, the USA: nearly 5.

The public authorities are particularly concerned with water, its supply and its purification. (800,000 French people still drink water containing too high a level of nitrate). Investments in this area, in the five coming years, will

amount to 81 billion francs, which is double what France spent on the problem between 1987 and 1991.

On the matter of industrial pollution, French firms are still lagging behind compared with their North European counterparts, but encouraging signs are beginning to appear. Thus, in 1991, 18% of investments

### OPINION

### The Poor and the Rich

In any community, however small, there are people who are considered as eccentrics or mad caps because their ideas, concepts or activities are unconventional. In more mature and affluent societies these people are tolerated and sometimes even indulged. It is said about them: they march to the beat of a different drum. Sometimes, these people with unconventional ideas have later been proven to be great inventors, scientists etc and have gone down in history as great men.

In our society also there are many who espouse unconventional ideas, but unfortunately these people and their ideas are not accepted and they are generally ridiculed, castigated and if their ideas are too far out of place they are turned out of the community.

But, fortunately for us, it appears that our society is on the path of becoming quite a mature one, if not an affluent one as yet. The indication and sign of this is that many people with very unconventional ideas without the benefit of any knowledge or touch of the grim reality of life of the common man of the country seem to have found shelter in the upper reach of the finance ministry. These people with their vast knowledge of economics, finance, accounting and hopefully a small dose of sociology, are formulating policies which though purported to be for the development of the country and welfare of the people is only succeeding in turning the expectations otherwise.

Though there are skeptics and cynics in our society who maintain that our economic policies are not made in the country but in Geneva and New York and our budget is not a national one but an international one as over 90% of the funds are contributed by donor countries and international organizations, I for one do not believe it and object to this kind of unpatriotic thinking. Because, the economic, tax and budgetary policies that are brilliant in substance and in their ability of being implemented and enforced in a fraction, uncontrolled and yes, sorry to say — in a corrupt — society seem so foolproof, they could not come from Geneva or New York but from the gentlemen who sit in the air conditioned offices in Dhaka but think

about Geneva and New York in more ways than one and would rather be there than where they are now.

One example of their wise policy can be given. A very common apparel "lungi" used mainly by rural and common man — every component that goes in the manufacture of this humble apparel is taxed at all levels at various rates of taxes. To begin the cycle — after the raw cotton reaches the port: Customs duty, development surtax, sales tax etc are levied on the item. After it leaves the port, and paying various informal but almost mandatory tolls at different points reaches the factory where it is made into year, further excise and sales tax is imposed. Then it arrives at the weavers where again sales tax and excise duty is charged. There may be some waiver to these rules from time to time, but, generally, this is the framework of taxes.

Similarly, every other input that goes in the manufacture of this most basic of materials is taxed: dyes, textile chemicals, finishing materials etc. So are the machineries, spare parts, lubricants etc. If the selling price of a lungi is 100 Taka — more than 50% of this has gone into taxes in one form or another. In contrast, there are only two or three tiers of taxes on a VCR which is more a luxury item, even which is sometimes "maraged" by the importer or, in plain language, smuggled in.

If the price of lungi goes any higher, many people in our society will arrive at a state where they will have no choice but wear only birthday suits or some close approximations of this. And this is not being said facetiously or to make an effect. On the other hand, the VCR owners whose main entertainment is watching people dancing and prancing in some approximation of birth day suit will have their fun and games at the cost of the poor lungi wearers!

Countless examples can be cited where the basic needs of the common man is heavily taxed and the luxuries of the rich including perfumes, cosmetics, expensive apparel, electrical appliances and electronic entertainment equipment, etc. are taxed at a lower rate. The irony is that the common man are paying larger proportion of their income in taxes than the rich and they are not aware of it as most of

these are indirect taxes. The other irony is that the rich have become rich at the cost of the poor as they are in the privileged position to manipulate the system to their best advantage. So the tax policy may be termed as robbing the poor to enrich the rich — a reverse of the Robin Hood syndrome. Also the main beneficiary of the tax revenue are the rich, because, it is their children who get a chance to attend institutions of higher learning, it is the streets near their homes which are paved, lighted with sodium lights or in some situations even nicely landscaped.

The other irony and sad fact is that the common man are totally unaware of the heavy burden of taxes on them and they do not wreat the rights of a tax payer as is done in more advanced societies. This is quite evident from the humble attitude, almost like a supplicant, the common man takes when he approaches even the lowest of the representatives of the government.

One of the main reasons of such an inequity and imbalance of the tax policy is that the policy-makers are not only detached from the common man but they, perhaps, also think that they belong to a different class — the ruling class. Also, may be their aspirations, goals and plans are oriented to ideals of foreign cultures where they would like to settle. They send their children to foreign schools, do their shopping in Bangkok or Singapore!

The frequent assertions and threats which often emanate from the honourable Finance Minister is indicative of the prevalent attitude of the hierarchy of the ministry. Many may construe these as evidence of the failure of their policies or an attempt or even a subterfuge to protect the "big interests" which unfortunately include smugglers, tax evaders and criminals. His exhortations of the Customs people, the Income Tax people etc, are like asking the wolves to raid the chicken coop. This type of directive can only be an outcome of insensitivity to the reality of life here as many among those he is surrounded with are, most probably, bigger tax evaders on a larger scale than the poor shop keepers in Maulvi Bazar.

Omar Osman Khan Motijheel C A, Dhaka

### To the Editor

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

### English-medium students

Sir, As a student of an English medium school, I would like to draw your kind attention towards the injustice which is being done, in our own country, to us.

After completing our "O" and "A" levels from London and Cambridge Universities, we are facing problems in getting admission to colleges in Bangladesh. The college authorities here give preference to students of Bengali medium over us even though we have better grades. As a result, we are compelled to go abroad for higher education. Even though our standard is much better than those of Bengali medium students we are not able to study in our own country. Many pay large sums of money to get admitted. Among us only those who belong to very wealthy families can go abroad for higher education. But middle-class people just cannot afford to send their wards abroad.

To solve the problem, our government should establish English medium colleges in our country, or should make rules so that qualified English medium students can be as easily admitted to colleges as Bengali medium students, so that we can go on with our higher education here. We would be proud of ourselves if

we could shine in our own country, rather than abroad.

Shabana Jalal Mohammadpur, Dhaka.

### Road blockade in Mirzakhil

Sir, These days we quite often face road blockade by various interested quarters causing great inconvenience to the public. This is being done in order to press home their various demands. In most cases the public has got nothing to do about and innocent people, particularly those travelling with families, suffer a lot in course of their journey. We would urge the government to take measures by establishing highway police patrols with control rooms to combat this menace so that people can move freely.

I would like to report one such incident which took place in our village Mirzakhil in Chittagong. Here a public road has been permanently barricaded — causing hindrance to safe passage of vehicles — by a local man, with some hired mastaans. This man, who proclaims himself as a 'Pir', wants to take advantage of a 'dargah' (300 metres away from the road) and is harassing the public by closing the thoroughfare to all types of vehi-

cles.

Nowhere in Islam it is mentioned that passengers have to abandon their cars near graveyard or dargah. Even at our holiest Makkah and Madina there are easy access to all kinds of vehicles. There is a strong rumour that this self-styled 'Pir' may soon collect money from the public in the name of 'Dargah'. Barricading a public road for such un-Islamic act and selfish gains is illegal and not acceptable to the public. We would appeal to the government to establish rule of law and take stern measures against those responsible for barricading a public thoroughfare.

Md Abul Kheir Mirzakhil, Chittagong.

### Niaz Murshed

Sir, Once a chess player of this sub-continent named Sultan won global fame. Now again the sub-continent is achieving such attainment as V. Anand of India recently defeated world champion Garry Kasparov. Our Niaz Murshed, the first Grand Master of this zone could show such sky-rocketing performance. But he does not get proper and adequate assistance from our government and concerned authorities as the Indian whizz-kid V. Anand gets. So, I urge to provide adequate assistance, sponsorship and patronage for Niaz Murshed so that he can develop his paragon and mercurial potentiality in chess.

We never want a "treasure-trove" like Niaz Murshed to go obscured. Rathan M. Choudhury East Hazpara, Dhaka