

Alarm over Algeria

Alarm signals are being sounded throughout the Muslim world and, indeed, in parts of Europe over the landslide electoral victory of the Islamic Salvation Front, Algeria's largest opposition party. This is seen as a step towards the emergence of the region's third Islamic republic, after Libya and Iran.

The result of Thursday's voting showed that the fundamentalists have decisively defeated its principal secular rival, the National Liberation Front which has ruled this western-oriented North African country for 30 years. The counting, on Friday left little doubt that the Front would capture absolute majority in the parliament when the electoral process, including the next round of polls set for Jan 16, is completed.

That the fundamentalists would do well in this first-ever election in the country was never in doubt. But the size of victory won by the Front has come as a shock to all secularist groupings. In recent years, the country's chronic economic woes, political uncertainties affecting the credibility of the indecisive administration and repression against dissident groups, including the Muslim fundamentalists, had combined to give the Islamic Salvation Front a platform that was gaining strength every day. In this context, the detention of the Front's two top leaders, Abbasi Madani and Ali Belhadj, since June, on charges of trying to take power by force, only increased the popularity of the fundamentalists among a sizable section of the country's 26 million people.

Having won the control of the parliament, the Front will now try to force the administration to hold a presidential election in a bid to replace President Chadli Benjedid whose term runs until January 1994. If the Front succeeds in this bid, the stage will be all set for sweeping changes ranging from putting women behind veils to prosecuting secularist activists for their alleged anti-Islamic activities. For the western-educated elite, this may well be the "beginning of a dark age", not only in Algeria but also in the other two North African states, Tunisia and Morocco, whose capacity to turn the tide remains very much in doubt.

No matter how one interprets the triumph of the Front, it should be clear to all three North African states and several other Muslim countries that authoritarianism, even under a secular flag, as practised by their governments provides the best possible reason to the millions to lean towards Islamic radicalism. Economic disparities, leading to widening of the gap between the rich and the poor, rampant corruption and a blind adherence to western-style consumerism only fuel the rising discontent among the multitude. It may be too late for some Middle East Arab countries — but, hopefully, not too late for others — to contain this mounting dissatisfaction through the pursuit of genuine democratic practices and pragmatic economic policies, as we see in a number of predominantly Muslim countries in Asia. While we firmly believe that Islamic fundamentalism, as we know it today, provides no solution to problems faced by Muslim countries anywhere in the world, we must recognise that, on the face of it, it offers an alternative of sorts to the kind of people who have given the Islamic Salvation Front a victory in the Algerian election. Where exactly the fundamentalists will win their next battle remains to be seen.

NGO Experience in Primary Education

It is heartening to see the government taking some concrete action to promote primary education in the country. The latest move by the education ministry is to make it compulsory in 64 thanas of as many districts. The decision is to take effect from the New Year's Day. It is understood from government announcements that this is the first phase of a far bigger programme of universalization of primary education in the coming years. Too many irresponsible pronouncements on this subject have already confused the public on the issue. Without realising the cost and far less, the work involved, ministers or other policy makers often raise false hopes among the public by making statements to the effect that illiteracy can be removed within a few years or that primary education can be ensured for all by the year 2000. A good two years have already passed since Bangladesh joined some other countries of the region in promising education for all by the turn of the century at the World Education Conference in March 1990 at Jomtien, Thailand.

Compared to the previous over ambitious plans the latest pronouncements of the education minister sounds far more realistic. What must be understood is that in the matter of education the challenge is not a one shot effort but a sustained one. It is not only that we should set up schools and make sure that every school-going kid goes to them. What is equally important is that they should continue to go to school over a minimum number of years so that the skills that they learn remain with them. It is well known that the existing official primary school system has become ineffective and corruption-ridden. With a drop-out rate of 65 to 80 per cent between class I and class V, the existing primary schools need a thorough overhaul to be able to provide the type of mass education as we desire. There need to be reforms of teaching methods, of the syllabus and of the teachers themselves. In this regard the NGO experience, especially that of BRAC has a lot to offer. The BRAC schools have a near cent per cent retention rate, a faster learning rate, provided at a far less cost than the official schools. There are other NGO bodies who have also done good work in promoting rural education effectively and cheaply. Now that the government is taking concrete action in the area of universalizing primary education, it really should learn as much as is possible from the NGO experience and not go its old ways which have not only been revealed to be ineffective, wasteful but also highly expensive.

HOUSING FOR ALL

Economic Growth and the Construction Industry

A residential building with five floors, ten apartments (two in each floor) with first class mosaic finish would cost Taka 700 per square foot minimum, exclusive of the cost of land in the city of Dhaka. It is simply too expensive. A middle level government officer with lifetime of honest savings through provident fund contributions, pension commutation and loan from the House Building Finance Corporation would have no access to his own house to live. A minimum of 750 square feet of floor space — indeed a very small apartment — would cost over half a million taka without the cost of land. If this is the fate of a government officer after 30 years of honest, dedicated service, then the entire housing outlook for the urban middle class is indeed pretty bleak.

Shortage of middle class housing in Dhaka has reached abominable proportions. On the other hand, a vibrant construction industry through its high labour intensity as well as demand for varieties of construction materials, fittings and fixtures, most of which are being, capable of being, manufactured within the country can tremendously boost economic growth and development.

Moreover, the nation's drive for labour intensive industrialisation is severely thwarted by high cost of construction of factory buildings. A 20,000 square feet of building for a garment factory can easily cost one crore taka including the cost of utilities like electricity, gas etc., but without the land purchase cost. Typically in any investment plan, land and building or civil construction account for around half of the total outlay.

However, government land for factory construction could as yet be obtained from BSCIC. In particular for small and medium scale enterprises. Land for residential housing is a distant mirage. All the resi-

dential areas of Dhaka or Chittagong today are of pre-1971 vintage. Not a single new housing development area has been developed during the last 20 years. Uttara or Baridhara are schemes conceived during 1960s.

Luxury

Urban residential lands are very much in short supply. In some areas of Dhaka city, price per katha (measuring one and two-third of a decimal) of land would fetch as much as half a million taka in solid cash. In spite of sky-high prices, there are extremely fortunate but rare few in the world's poorest country who do not hesitate to cut out a crore of taka for a big house of golden land; then build a luxurious house (sometimes) with a swimming pool on the roof-top by spending yet another crore of taka.

Such investments, from the nation's point of view is utter waste. The example of Taka two crore invested in one single residential housing as 20 per cent equity (and the rest long-term loan and equity from institutional sources) would have been sufficient to set up a textile yarn spinning mill of the standard 25,000 spindles, creating steady employment for few hundred workers, saving foreign exchange on imports of yarn and most important, making a direct and vital contribution to economic growth.

Simply go around Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara and Defence Officers Housing Estate, and count the number of such luxury houses where in land and building put together, an investment of at least half a crore has been made. To me, it represents the crucial opportunity foregone to develop a very large number of not too small but at least medium scale manufacturing industries.

The whole housing scenario that has perhaps inadvertently developed today is such that those who possess the resources for industrial invest-

ment waste them on luxury living; while those who deserve the resources for modest investment in housing cannot afford to do so.

Accessibility of modest homeowners to new dwellings constitute the fulfillment of a very basic middle-class aspiration anywhere in the world. If this could be done, the BNP Government should realize, they could win over on a long run basis, politically the most vital section of the population who themselves would then make the necessary effort to assure a BNP victory at the next election.

The question now boils down to how this could be done. First is availability of land for housing. We are in a land-short country and within it urban land for housing in Dhaka city is all the more scarce. At

the same time, economy of land use is hardly every practised. So is the case with several government institutions where present location as well as the extent of prime urban land occupied cannot be justified.

Ready-made Locations The examples are Dhaka Central Jail, BDR barracks at Pilkhana and land released by the Tejgaon airport. The Jail and the BDR can be accommodated within the Cantonment area and the three places should constitute land for multi-storied housing development with minimum of four floors and eight family-residential units in each building. More such land could be made available by shifting the veterinary hospital to Savar dairy cattle farm and also releasing a part of the land occupied by Railways earlier. These are ready-made lands located at the heart of the city area and involve very little development cost. These are also substantial areas in size and in terms of

modest home owners. Cost of construction can be reduced by a total and thoroughgoing restructuring of the construction industry. Custom made housing by individual homeowners, unit by unit is bound to be highly expensive. We have to learn the mass scale production technology, where each real estate developer is responsible for building few hundred units per annum following very few standard designs. The standard building components like beam, pillar, floor sections, etc. are all manufactured in factories with controlled inflows of construction inputs: cement, sand, water, steel, stone or brick chips etc. whose supplies are again received on a regular basis by captive cement plants, steel plants, brick fields and sand quarries. As a result material costs could be reduced by 30 to 40 per cent.

Uniform standard designs would also reduce waste of materials, inevitable in any custom made building; their inner city location. Allowing for mixed commercial and residential type of urban planning, at least several thousand residential flats could be constructed.

Suppose, the government takes up the plan to construct 100 buildings, 15 to 20 floors each and 4 to 6 flats in each floor within the next 2 to 3 years. Over 10,000 residential units could be made available in the inner city areas, as mentioned above. Supply of land can be augmented in the first instance from within the congested areas of the city. It is surprising but true; cost of land to individual families being further reduced by means of multi-storied construction. Now the question is to minimise cost of construction itself within the range of affordability of the middle class.

From LDC to NIC by Shahed Latif

cheaper plastic substitute for floors, pipes and fittings, standard factory made doors and windows using wood substitutes can also lower costs. Basically, it is the construction of houses not unit by unit but like in a factory manufacturing apartment units, few thousand every year which should bring about drastic lowering of construction costs.

Inner City Scheme The inner city housing development scheme of say 10,000 family apartment units as suggested earlier, size varying between 600 to 1,200 square feet could be taken up for development within the next 2 to 3 years, i.e. three to four thousand units per annum. Similar housing scheme can be spread over the six district headquarters towns as well, with obvious concentration in Chittagong and Khulna. As mentioned earlier, the desired political impact is bound to be generated for the government.

In this connection, the Singaporean example is worth quoting. Mr Lee Kuan Yew, remained Prime Minister for decades by getting elected each time with thumping majority. His highly successful housing scheme whereby the government provided a flat for every family was substantially responsible for his immense and continuing popularity, not only because of shelter for all but the way economy was boosted through the construction programme.

Given determination, proper planning, organization and management, history can be repeated, not in detail but transported to an entirely new location for re-enactment on a vastly expanded scale.

The last question, where is the money for the poor middle class to buy the apartments. As mentioned earlier, it must be affordable to the average salary earner. If following the suggestions — a 750 to 800 square feet apartment is possible to construct on a mass scale (at least a few thousand units per

annum) at an average cost of Tk 200,000 to Tk 250,000, then down payment of 50 per cent and the balance on a long term low interest loan will make it affordable to the target group. If necessary a subsidy of 10 to 20 per cent on the cost of construction is justified.

Factory Building A similar strategy could be adopted for construction of single or multi-storied factory buildings for long-term lease or sell to the investors. In new areas, for example across the bridges on the other side of the Buriganga, Stalakhya and Meghna rivers or at Mirpur, combination of industrial estates, residential areas and business districts, practically new townships, could be conceived as an expanded version of the massive physical construction programme. If the present costs could be drastically minimised, very soon such programmes would finance themselves with minimum burden on the state. The key is cost minimisation with simple, sturdy construction and no frills attached.

The strategy embodies physical manifestation of growth — not running away with bank loans or stealing aid money through huge commissions.

A construction boom is the surest sign of economic growth. It is with cement and steel that economic development in its brassacks is vigorously promoted where millions work and sweat in the sun to create employment for yet few more millions. Tinkering at the margin with technicalities of internal rate of return must be left behind sleeping at the post. What is required is a vision of the future when the afternoon sun would cast longer shadows due to high rise buildings. It is the steel and concrete cityscape of the future which the vision must pursue relentlessly during the tenure of the present government.

This is economic growth for the march to NIC.

Rainbow Warrior Affair Haunts New Zealand

David Robie writes from Auckland

The bombing of the Greenpeace flagship Rainbow Warrior in Auckland harbour on 10 July 1985 shocked the Pacific. France paid compensation to New Zealand and the Greenpeace organisation. Now the controversy has reopened with the arrest in Switzerland of French agent Gerald Andries. More than 70 per cent of New Zealanders want him extradited and prosecuted.

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| 1985
July 10 | Two explosions sink Rainbow Warrior in Auckland. Photographer Fernando Pereira killed. |
| July 16 | French diver Gerald Andries and two others escape in yacht Ouvea from Norfolk Island, scuttling it in Coral Sea. Reported picked up by French nuclear submarine Rubis. |
| November 4 | Two French agents convicted of manslaughter and held in custody. |
| 1986
July 9 | New Zealand agrees to transfer agents to Hao Atoll to serve 3 years. France to pay New Zealand compensation. |
| 1991
November 23 | Case reopens with arrest of Andries. |

French ambassador Gabriel de Bellescize has been recalled for consultations at the Quai d'Orsay. The view of French foreign affairs officials that the case is dead has been rejected in New Zealand which considers the 1986 negotiated settlement covered only two other French agents involved in the bombing — Alain Mafart and Dominique Prieur.

Bolger, anxious to salvage the warmer relations with France, is caught in a difficult position. Saddled with the lowest popularity rating (seven per cent) of any New Zealand prime minister in the past 16 years and mounting bitterness over his handling of the troubled economy, he cannot risk further alienating the electorate.

But he has encountered some surprising allies in former Labour Prime Minister Geoffrey Palmer and several newspapers which have challenged whether anything is to be gained by allowing the diplomatic "terrible nightmare" to be reopened.

Palmer, who played a key role in the events leading up to the UN arbitration, questions whether it is in New Zealand's

best interests to pursue the extradition.

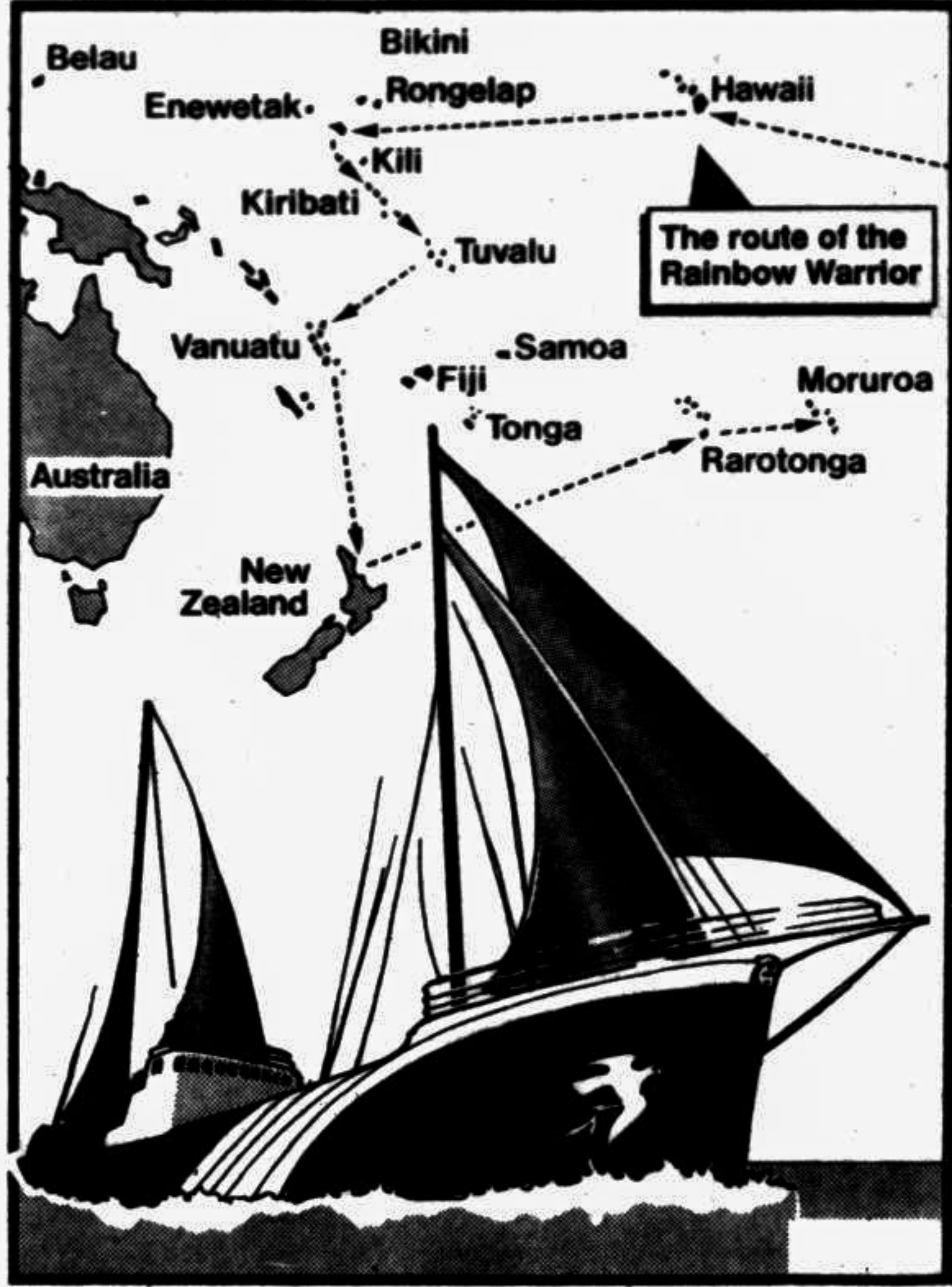
Recalling the impact on New Zealand-French relations of the bombing and the jailing of the two French secret agents caught at the time, he said the imprisonment of Mafart and Prieur was appropriate — "but how long do you go on with these matters?"

The Sunday Star called on Attorney-General Pū East to declare the country did not want Andries before there was any suggestion of political deals, threats of trade embargoes by France or offers of money.

"France is the guilty party," the paper said. "It always was — and it still is. The (nuclear) tests at Moruroa Atoll, which the Rainbow Warrior was in the course of protesting, are an affront to this part of the world."

The arrest of Andries is bad news for Bolger also because he had previously attacked former prime minister David Lange's handling of the case involving Mafart and Prieur.

New Zealand came under heavy threats of European trade sanctions if the pair were not released. They served



only a fraction of their 10-year manslaughter sentence on the French Polynesian Atoll of Hao and then returned to France — allegedly because Mafart was ill and Prieur pregnant.

Andries, also known as Eric Audremer or Eric Audrenc, faces charges of murder, willful damage and conspiracy to commit arson.

He and his cremates — Roland Verge and Jean-Michel Barcelo — on board the 11.6 metre yacht Ouvea were questioned on Norfolk Island several days after the bombing, but the police did not have

enough proof of their involvement.

Andries, Verge and Barcelo were then believed to have scuttled the Ouvea in the Coral Sea and been picked up by the French nuclear-powered submarine Rubis, which took them to Tahiti and safety.

Andries later embarrassed the French secret service, DGSE, by giving interviews to a French magazine and taking part in the writing of a book, Mission Oxygène, which purported to be an inside story on the sabotage operation.

The embarrassment for France has been deepened with the signing of a declaration against terrorism late in November. Along with Britain and the US, France supported the declaration which said: "The three states reaffirm their complete condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and denounce any complicity of states in terrorist acts."

The three states reaffirm their commitment to put an end to terrorism. They consider that the responsibility of states begins whenever they take part directly in terrorist actions or directly through harbouring, training, providing facilities, arming or providing financial support, or any form of protection, and that they are responsible for their actions before the individuals states and the United Nations."

The declaration also cited the bombings of Pan Am flight 103 and UTA 772 and demanded that Libya "prove its renunciation of terrorism."

Commentators in New Zealand accuse France of hypocrisy if it condemns alleged Libyan terrorism while exonerating itself over the role of Andries in the Rainbow Warrior — GEMINI NEWS

DAVID ROBIE is a New Zealand journalist specialising in Pacific and development issues.

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.

Police

Sir, I would like to thank the writer of 'The Police in Action' published in The Daily Star on 22 December.

I am fully agree with the opinion about highhandedness of the police personnel. I would like to add that the police actions are sometimes worse than hijackers'. Because the hijackers often have some fear to do it, but the police

people in the name of Durbur Operation pick up the wards of well to do people of the respective areas and later compel the guardians to pay what should I say 'ransom' otherwise the wards would be put under detention, and may be tagged to false cases. The innocent guardians who had no good connection find no alternative but to oblige the 'authority' in order to avoid the police and

court harassments.

The Special Powers Act was created for whom I do not know but I know it well that this Act had been misused by the police during the time of Ershad and still it continues. I would urge the Home Ministry of this democratic country to enquire about the practices of the corrupt police officials and give some exemplary punishment so that others get lesson out of it. If I am correct the respected Home Minister is a lawyer and he knows the 'bad habits' of the police and people of this country. I along with many others will really be grateful if he can spare some time to put his home in order. Sanawar Rashid Gulshan, Dhaka

Hartal

Sir, People were seen greatly relieved as they heard the postponement news of the SKOP's 48 hours strike scheduled to begin from December 22. Last week I had the opportunity to talk to a section of people on our present state of affairs. On hartal, people maintain a different view. Now-a-days, people follow hartals not exactly because they support the issues for the hartal call but mostly because they are afraid of violence and destructive activities often carried out by the hartal activists. They are afraid because their shops, vehicles and other belongings might be damaged or destroyed by unruly folks. However, hartal is definitely

an effective institution for realizing just demands and establishing justice. But before calling hartal, concerned parties should consider the gravity of the cause for hartal. Under no circumstances, national interests should be jeopardised on mere political differences or petty interests.

M. Zahidul Haque
Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka.

SAF Games results

Sir, The results of the ongoing fifth SAF Games coming from Colombo, are rather disappointing for us. Nearly 200 athletes from Bangladesh are participating in different events but their overall performance is not as consider-

able as their number in comparison to Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan. The host country Sri Lanka is showing excellent performance snatching most of the gold medals; on the other hand, our Bangladeshi boys and girls achievements are only seldom mentionable.

Regarding our football team's defeat to Pakistan, one journalist from Colombo commented that players' lack of feeling for the country was one of the reasons behind that debacle. How bad is our luck!

I do think, our concerned authorities and athletes should criticise themselves for their failures and try to take lessons from others.

Dr. M. A. Hanif
Haldarpara, Brahmanbaria