

Superstructure Not Conducive to Facing the Challenge

by Md. Anisur Rahman

THE Report of the Task Forces on Bangladesh Development Strategies for the 1990's is indeed a phenomenon. Hiss off to the Planning Adviser of the Interim government for his imaginative initiative to make the best use of his temporary office, and to the over 250 professionals who gave their seat without asking for a material reward, to help the nation's leaders formulate policies for the development of the country.

Twenty nine Task Forces in areas of economics, development administration, technology, energy, women in development and environment, deliberated on the state of affairs in their respective fields and on directions for positive change, under three objectives of development strategies given to them as proclaimed by most of our political parties and in the successive Five Year Plans, i.e. (i) alleviation of poverty; (ii) greater self-reliance in the development process; and (iii) ensuring a process of sustained growth for the economy.

I have a basic problem in talking in terms of concepts like poverty alleviation which give the people a negative self-image and delivery orientation rather than invoking creative effort from them with the needed transfer of control over productive assets. This, however, I shall not harp on here. The report of the Task Forces comprise a collection of information, analysis and recommendations in the various respective fields, for the first time put together in one handy set of documents. The developments challenge for the nations comes out in this set of documents in clear, unambiguous terms.

The information and analysis of the economy and of its performance since independ-

dence, and of the "superstructure" governing it, add up to the following dismal picture:

The growth rate of GNP over the last 20 years since independence has averaged in the order of four per cent per annum which has not given any dynamism to the economy; growths in total agricultural as well as food crop outputs have progressively decelerated, both having been in the neighbourhood of two per cent per annum in the eighties, barely keeping pace with the rate of population growth; industry has stagnated with its share of GNP declining in the last decade from a peak level of 10.8 per cent in 1979-80 to 8.49 per cent in 1988-89; the infrastructure of the country is

population, have been increasingly destroying resources for future survival and sustainable development— industrial pollution destroying fisheries resources; diversion away from soil into the household oven valuable nutrients and organic matters destroying soil quality; depletion of bio-diversity vital for human survival directly as well as through its effects on the sustainability of agriculture, forestry and fisheries production; and rapid depletion of forest resources, the effective tree cover today being an alarming 5.1 per cent of the total land area with the "danger limit", I understand, being in the order of 20-25 per cent.

the interest of the "millionaires" rather than of the ordinary people. A sad erosion of national self-respect surrendering initiatives for the solution of problems to external assistance, viewing successes in accessing external funds as high credentials, and a lust for foreign products have left little encouragement for local initiatives and the production of indigenous goods.

Donor politics is very much a part of this negative superstructure. The promotion of political and commercial interests of the donors rather than serious development of the country, seems to have been the dominant objective of aid policy. Aid has come easy

it should, however, be clear from the set of reports that the three objectives of development strategy given to the Task Forces as guidelines are not attainable without a drastic change in the "superstructure"— e.g. without the coming into political power of genuine representatives—not of the nation's millionaires but of the wider society; in the regeneration of spirit and culture of self-pride in all spheres of economic and social life, and in the donor agencies cooperating with such transformations rather than seeking client governments in the country to promote their own industrial business and employment interests. These preconditions do not exist at this stage.

in recommending an unlimited role of private enterprise in industry, the Task Force on Industrial Policy has not considered either the social or the environmental implications of such a strategy. The nation had rejected the concept of "20 families as a part of its independence movement, for reasons which if anything should be even stronger today. The display of affluence by the "millionaires" in the society amidst severe mass poverty and widespread unemployment is already contributing to mounting social unrest, and an unbridled private venture to industrialization seems unlikely even to settle down. With the Task Force on Environment citing the near total lack of enforced regulations on industrial (land marine) pollution, (the question of who will bear the environment costs of private enterprises needs also to be addressed. The predisposition of the Task Force on Industrial Policy toward competitive market signals without a caution also overlooks the fact that the market is typically environment-blind which this society cannot any longer afford to be. It is already clear from the report of the Task Force on Environment and also that of Technology that without direct social control of environment-affecting private initiatives much of the country's economic activities are likely to become technically unsustainable beyond some 20 years or so.

(To be concluded tomorrow)

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Renewed Tax Crunch

The fixation of taxes on as many as 54 items, including several daily necessities, has come as a surprise. Quietly effected without any prior public announcement, the move is going to rain unpleasant economic fall-outs across the country. It will doubtlessly stab at the consumers' already softened spots, and more, perhaps a rumpus cannot be ruled out. The increase has come mostly within the band of import duties which will surely affect the whole sector of manufactures as also imported necessities. Prices of other commodities would tend to have a sympathetic rise. But the more important question is how do you justify the mid-year tax increase when you have already made the annual budget for the country? It is the people who will have to bear the brunt of the sudden price hike and their confidence in the managers of the country's economic affairs is likely to further erode.

Admittedly, people's purchasing power hit an all-time low now with the commodity prices going through a series of upswing in the recent past making things worse. How they will cope with this latest price surge should be a major cause for concern. Let the point not be missed that when the people's purchasing power comes down, the domestic economy also slumps adversely affecting in turn the country's foreign trades and commerce. Already in a shambles, the economy of Bangladesh will suffer a further setback due to this unwarranted measure.

While the opposition of people to the price increases from 20 per cent to 75 per cent on various items of daily necessities is a certainty, the reduction on others from 20 to 160 per cent will only benefit the privileged classes — mostly. The proposed extra revenue earning, to the tune of Tk 50 crore, accruing from the measure may hopefully provide the government with shoring up its affairs a little. But at what a cost! It is the recent successive governments who have taught us that 50 crore Taka is not a pot of money. It's in the news that the same amount of money would be spent on refurbishing nine Feni schools.

Is the government being compelled to go for the measure with the express aim to supplement a part of the shortfall it has now to undergo due to the pay-rise of the government employees? But when the market is shy, the plus points expected to derive from the increased commodity price may be neutralised, or worse, can cut back in the negative. Neither of which can be welcomed by the government. The best bet is not to go for such ad hoc devices as the mid-year tax-rise and to give the economy a push through infusing into it new blood. Until or unless the economy fails to vibrate with the participation by all in society, chances are that the desired economic miracle will never take place.

Making the tax burden heavier still without a corresponding rise in productivity, one risks society's further pauperisation. Under no circumstances can this be a wise remedy. The move has already come under attack from different quarters, more are expected when this is widely known. It is time the government stopped deciding first and justifying afterwards.

A Bad Start

With officials and even ministers of the Hun Sen administration virtually looting the country, usually by selling off government properties and pocketing the proceeds, Cambodia has certainly made a bad start in its journey towards democracy and economic progress. And this is not all. The rampant corruption is fuelled by widespread smuggling of all kinds of consumer goods from Thailand and Singapore, black-marketing and sky-rocketing prices of daily necessities. It is a dismal situation, utterly disgraceful for the Vietnamese-backed government in Phnom Penh.

One redeeming feature is provided by the upsurge among students in the capital, who have staged repeated and often violent demonstrations against corruption. While the support of the public should surely be with the students, the police has reacted just in the way hot-headed law enforcing agencies do in many countries, by firing at the demonstrators and killing and wounding several of them. Meanwhile, the National Assembly has banned further demonstrations.

Seen from different angles, the situation is volatile. While the students have been forced to stage their anti-corruption demonstrations, the situation also provides scopes for Khmer Rouge to exploit the discontent among the people against both the Hun Sen regime and the country's figurehead head of state, Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

Within a few months the United Nations troops will move in and take over major government functions. An advance party of UN administrators are already in Phnom Penh to prepare the ground for the take-over. If the situation in Phnom Penh does not improve immediately, the United Nations should expedite the process and prevent Cambodia from plunging into total chaos. Here lies the first challenge facing the new Secretary General, Dr Butros Ghali.

Vanuatu Switches Over to Francophone Leadership

Anna Buckley writes from Port Vila

A general election in Vanuatu, the former New Hebrides, in the Pacific has resulted in a surprise switch of power. From independence in 1980 the country had been under anglophone rule led by Father Walter Lini. Now an indecisive election has brought to office a francophone prime minister.

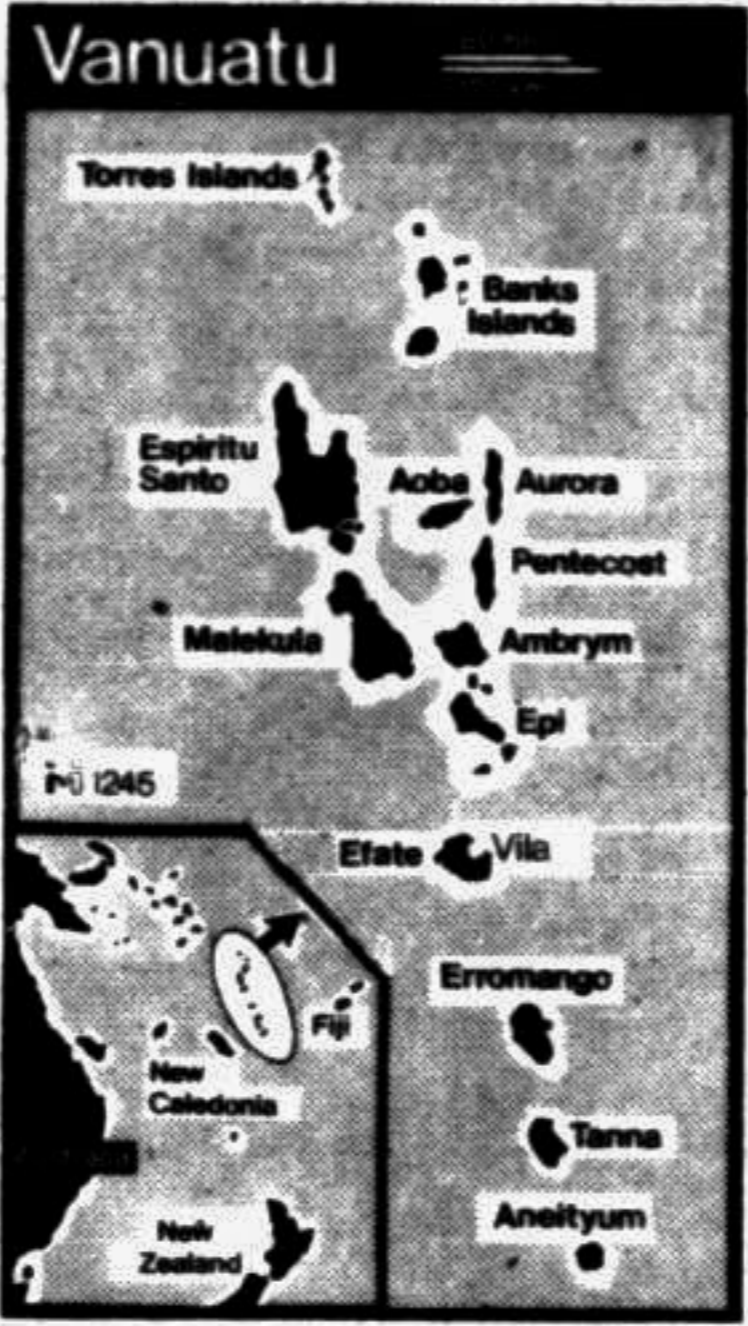
A general election has brought to power Maxim Carlot, the first francophone prime minister of the 70-island Pacific state of Vanuatu. From independence in 1980 until earlier this year the country was ruled by the Anglican priest, Father Walter Lini.

He was ousted last August when half the MPs voted against him. His successor was Donald Kalpokas. Now, after a few months, Kalpokas is Leader of the Opposition.

It took almost a week for the results of the fourth general election in Vanuatu to reach the capital, Port Vila, from the islands of the archipelago. The outcome was uncertain. Under the Westminster-style constitution, 46 MPs were elected. None of the four main political parties had won a clear majority.

A three-way split in the Vanua'aku Party (VP) left it with only 10 of the 27 seats secured in the last general election in 1987. Ten former VP seats went to the new National United Party (NUP). Another four went to the Melanesian Progressive Party (MPP), which was set up after a coup attempt in 1988 resulting in riots in this otherwise peaceful country.

Traditional movements demanding greater autonomy for individual islands — NaGramel



and Friend Melanesia Party — each won a seat, as did the dying Tan Union.

Clearly in the lead with 19 seats was the Union of

Moderate Parties (UMP) — an odd assortment of francophone factions and cult movements, united in the Seventies by a desire to delay British-backed plans for early independence.

The UMP is now the most popular party, backed by more than 50,000 ni-Vanuatu (about one-third of the population), spread throughout the islands. A coalition was needed to form a government.

In the search for a suitable parliamentary partner, UMP negotiated with each of the three other main parties. The UMP platform promised free health and education, and restoration of the French language to equal importance with the other two official languages, English and the pidgin lingua franca Bislama.

Perhaps the most controversial point of policy, however, was the UMP plan to introduce freehold land title in a country where, constitutionally, land belongs to traditional owners.

Many believed UMP/MPP to

be the most likely coalition. MPP support has grown steadily since the party was formed. The former VP secretary-general, now leader of MPP, Barak Sope, however, pushed for the prime minister's portfolio.

He also insisted on the MPP motto of "my land, my life," whereby land currently in public ownership would be returned to custom owners to be administered by private trusts. Despite his seemingly limitless supply of funds, Sope's demands were not met.

Although favoured by UMP, the Vanua'aku Party did not join forces with it. In the words of one VP supporter, "we would rather go into opposition than compromise on almost every point of policy."

more closely allied with French interests, remains uncommitted on the issue.

After almost a century of joint Anglo-French Condominium rule, aptly nicknamed "pandemonium," the legacy of competing foreign powers still lingers in Vanuatu. The VP expelled French ambassadors at an average rate of one every two years, for alleged UMP support.

During his brief spell as leader of the Vanua'aku Party from August to November 1991, Kalpokas made significant efforts to normalise relations with France, renewing the land lease on the French embassy and reversing two deportation orders on French businessmen. But the last ambassador, banned from the country in 1987, remains in exile.

The ousting of Father Lini followed a period of increasingly dictatorial rule in which 13 ministers and more than 50 political appointees were sacked within 12 months.

Lini is taking a backseat in parliamentary politics this year, but his sister, Hilda Lini, and two other relatives are represented in the new cabinet, causing recent accusations of nepotistic appointments to resurface.

As Minister for Health and Rural Water Supply, Hilda Lini, is the first woman cabinet member. Sethy Regevanu (NUP) has been reinstated as Deputy Prime Minister and added the Ministry of Justice, Culture and Women's Affairs to his portfolio. All other cabinet members are UMP.

Maxim Carlot was elected unanimously by members of UMP and NUP at the first meeting of the new parliament on December 16. After 11 years of anglophone rule, many students from British missionary schools rather than French lycées, fear for their jobs. So do heads of departments, staff at Radio Vanuatu, civil servants and teachers.

There is talk of a purge of the public service. Changes, are inevitable, but the consequences need not be that dramatic. Carlot and Kalpokas are both experienced politicians committed to making democracy work in Vanuatu.

— GEMINI NEWS
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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.

Finance Act '91

Sir, A large number of letters and several articles had appeared in the various dailies including your esteemed paper on the Finance Act '91. However, I want to restrict myself only to a new section introduced in the Income Tax Ordinance 1984 (XXX VI of 1984). This is the new section 53 H of the ordinance.

By section 53 H, Sub-Registrar (registering authority) has been empowered to collect income-tax at the rate five per cent on the value of the property sought to be transferred, assigned or limited at the time of registration of the related document. The irony is that this is not the end of the story. The Sub-Registrars will send a list of sellers in a prescribed form through the Inspector General of Registration to the Income Tax Department and the Income Tax officer concerned will thereafter pursue all such cases as provided in the Income Tax Act. Previously, before the introduction of the new section, the Income Tax officer was the sole authority to deal with the transaction of sale and he alone was empow-

ered to determine the gain and assess income tax thereon. But now two different authorities have been empowered to deal with every transaction, thereby compelling a seller to approach two different authorities, namely the Sub-Registrar and the Income Tax officer. This has obviously subjected a seller to more harassment, financial hardship and loss of time. The avowed policy of all governments is to minimise these problems of a taxpayer and reduce the tax collection costs but the new section is counter to this principle. In the new system, a seller initially has to tackle the Sub-Registrar and anyone having knowledge of that office knows how difficult it would be to get the matter resolved. Subsequently the Income Tax officer concerned will re-examine the deal and he will proceed in his own way. The process will compel the seller to undergo immense hardships, expenses and delay over again. Undoubtedly the proceedings will be a long drawn-out one with all accompanying problems, and the seller will be a victim of circumstances at two stages, once at the level of the Sub-Registrar and then again at the

level of the Income Tax officer.

The reason for introducing the new section 53 H was attributed by the Finance Minister in his budget speech to the delay in obtaining TP certificate from the Income Tax officer concerned. If that be the case the solution lies in prescribing a reasonable time limit by which the ITO must issue the TP certificate. This is not an absurdity and can be easily enforced.

In the previous system, collection of tax was a settled fact as no TP certificate could be obtained without prior payment of the tax but in the present system realisation of tax after registration may in most cases be difficult and sometimes even impossible.

We strongly urge the authority concerned to abolish the new section to mitigate the sufferings of the sellers on the one hand and ensure against loss of public revenue on the other.

Anisur Rahman,
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Liberation struggle

Sir, I was not born when the struggle began in 1952. I was not old enough to remember what happened in 1971 and I most definitely did not learn about our past from the pages of school text books. My familiarity with our history of struggle is because my "Nani" made sure that her grandchildren did not forget what the War of Independence was all about.

Reading last Victory Day supplements I realized how little my contemporaries know about the Country and I am afraid for the post '71 born children the liberation struggle may become an outdated record to be tucked away in the closets or swept under the rugs.

I find it rather bizarre that people should be writing to The Daily Star pointing out that the passages of history should grant reference to people like Mariata so the nation's children may know of her contributions to Bangladesh. May I ask as to how many books mention Bangabandhu and how many know that there is more to the land where the famous Shishu Park now stands?

Not all martyrs who died in 1971 are famous, and not all their children have an identity. My mother's maternal uncle lost his life during the war but no one ever asked his widow to narrate her story let alone give her compensation. No one knows about my "Mama" Dr Ali Haif Salim who was at Agartala in 1971. Today only a few family members who know about his brutal death on the streets of Bengazi along with his wife and son make it a point to attend the Milad Mahfil in his honour every year.

Though limited, I am glad that my "Nani" made it a point to teach her grandchildren so that they never forget about the others who lost their lives for Bangladesh People who have long been forgotten for they were not famous. Forgive me, if my ears are not sensitive

enough for people like Somi Kaiser and Tonmoy Choudhuri.

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Police

Sir, This has reference to the opinion of Mr A M Sayed Khan published in The Daily Star on December 23 under the caption "The Police in Action". Appreciating the views expressed by Mr Khan I want to add a few lines of my own.

My motorcycle was stolen from my residence on January 1 last at about 10 pm. Immediately I rushed to the Cantonment PS to lodge a complaint. But it took me at least one hour to get the complaint registered. When I got the second copy, I was surprised to see that it was treated as general diary. When I asked the duty officer as to why a case of theft was not treated as F.I.R he could not give any satisfactory reply. I requested him to accompany me or send someone to hold an enquiry, so that the thieves should not get any chance to remove the motorcycle from the locality. To this he replied that he has given wireless message to different persons and now it is their headache. I returned to my residence at about 11:30 pm with a broken heart. I realized if police can behave like this with educated people then what relief the uneducated poor people would get from them.

The matter did not end there. Fortunately, when one of my friends came to know about this, he approached his one of the relations who is a high ranking officer in the police. As a result in the middle of April last, the Sub-Inspector of Police from Cantonment PS came to my residence to enquire about the theft, from whom we came to know that the GD entry made on 1.1.91 was treated as F.I.R in April. What a surprise! Thereafter, the matter rests there and I do not know what is the fate of the F.I.R.

If things move like this in Dhaka, the picture is much darker elsewhere in the country.

Mr Khan has suggested "to educate the people about the rights and limits of power of the law enforcing agencies". I am, too, in doubt whether a policeman himself knows his own rights, limits and duty. If they are made responsible and punished for their misdeeds (both financially and by badges) for the good works and prompt action, then things may turn to be better, perhaps.

I am of the opinion that lack of regular training and absence of accountability to the people have made the police irresponsible, and also vulnerable to corruption and other vices.

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