The Daily Star

Dhaka, Wednesday, January 1, 1992

Challenges of 1992

Never before in recent history has a new year offered such daunting challenges, with a mixture of hopes and fears, as 1992. If 1991 made history, with all its epoch-making dramatic events, the year that lies ahead might show where this history would be taking us. We should discern its direction, its underlying meanings, possibilities and even dangers.

Here, our thoughts naturally turn to the national scene. The challenges which stare at us from across the frontier of 1992 are formidable. Yet, whether one looks at the national scene or turns to the international one, we share one common challenge : It is the consolidation of the gains made in the past year by the newly emerging democracies in Bangladesh and several countries in Eastern Europe and Africa. This consolidation is not a matter of rhetoric or exhortations, nor is its cause served by lip service to democracy. Again, as we found out during 1991, the consolidation of democracy involves a responsibility that is shared by the ruling party and the opposition, in fact, by all political groupings, inside and outside the parliament.

The plea by the Chief Justice, Mr Shahabuddin Ahmed, named by this paper as The Man of the Year for 1991, urging the political parties to reach a "consensus" on all major issues, stems from the Judge's concern for consolidation of our democratic gains made in 1991. The views of the former Acting President, reported elsewhere in this paper, are couched in a moderate language. This paper will repeat the plea in a stronger language, more as a warning than an advice. If the ruling party and the opposition cannot seriously try to work towards the consensus, divisiveness will eat into the vitals of our nation and the watershed of 1991 will be no more than a passing phase in our turbulent history.

However, even in this shared responsibility, the government of Begum Khaleda Zia has a special role to play in creating the necessary climate, not just for promoting consensus among political parties but also for raising the level of credibility and effectiveness of the administration among cross-section of our people, in the private sector, among intellectuals and the media, among students and even among donor nations and aid agencies. We sincerely believe that the Prime Minister's own personal commitment to accountability of the government and transparency of its policies is strong. But how effectively is this commitment carried out in the day-to-day administration by various ministries ? Are the policies, especially on economic and financial issues, firm and consistent ? Do formulation of policies in these — and other — areas based on consultation and inter-action with interested parties ? Or are they prompted by short-term political expediency ?

The government may find these questions awkward, difficult and even hostile. But we raise them because we believe in the capacity of the present administration to deal with them and solve them. Herein lies our confidence in the government of Begum Khaleda Zia, a confidence which, we pray and hope, will remain unshaken during the year ahead.

Killing Cold

The severe cold wave now sweeping across the country has left at least a score of people dead over the past few days. This casualty figure in all likelihood may go up when the final count is made. No wonder most of the deaths caused by the wintry chill have been reported from the north of the country. First, mercury always tends to fall by a few degrees more in that region compared to other parts of the country due no doubt to higher latitudes and closer proximity to the Himalayas. Second, very badly affected by this year's floods, the people of the northern region were already reeling under the bane of an unprecedented floods' after-effects. Cold made the crueller by pauperisation is in fact taking the toll.

That this winter would wreak a havoc among the already vulnerable people in the north was known and the point had even been discussed before. But making preparations for the winter by the people already bitten by the floods was obviously out of question. The responsibility of the Government in this respect cannot be overemphasised. Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia herself distributed some blankets to the shelterless wayside people. But this is more a personal and at best a symbolic gesture. The important thing is to pool collective resources at the national level and for the government to press into service all of its relevant resources.

Not many things are known to have been done in that direction. Both hunger and cold have found an easy prey in the north, thanks to the listless way of dealing with the emergency that calls for urgent redress. However daunting the task may be, something could really be done given the seriousness of purpose and sincerity on the part of the administration. Apart from the material provision, of which we have a shortage, something could really be done within our existing facilities.

We strongly suggest that all school buildings, mosques and temples be made open to the winter-hit people, at least for the night. The bite of the cold surely would be less severe there. Old clothes could be procured — either as donation or for a nominal price — from abroad, if only the issue was given a serious thought in time. There is still time for something to be done on both these counts. Add to this the starting of a few gruel kitchens and possibly this will go a long way towards lessening the suffering of the cold-stricken people.

SKOP versus the People

by S. Alam Rashid

THE negotiations between the government and SKOP bring to mind the 'Solidarity' movement in Poland but with the all-important distinction that while 'Solidarity' sought to introduce democracy into a totalitarian system, SKOP apparently seeks to reinforce the historical totalitarianism that is currently threatened by incipient democracy.

In its periodic threats to immobilise the country, SKOP appears to have convinced itself that it still holds the balance of power between the civilian and military blocs that have, since before 1971, effectively controlled the state in the name of the people. In this assessment, SKOP is not entirely incorrect: to the extent that successive regimes have had to succumb to the pressure of a political will existing outside both the bureaucracy and the military, SKOP has been very successful.

Today, however, SKOP faces an unfamiliar situation. It faces neither a legislature maneuvered into place by the bureaucracy nor one installed by a military regime, equipped in either case with rubber stamps. For the first time (arguably), SKOP is confronted with a freely elected parliament that jeopardises its strategy of self-perpetuation. It is confronted with the prospect of a liberalised economy in which, it is hoped, there will be less state intervention. It is confronted with the prospect of having to deal with a widely dispersed private sector made up of an electorate.

A market economy and privatisation are not good for SKOP as it needs guarantees for its continued survival. It needs a state-controlled economy and a large public sector on which to feed. The prevailing world-wide bias against state-controlled economies replaces guaranteed employment with a demand for competence. In the area of competence, SKOP finds itself on very soft ground.

Wisely, in its view, SKOP has learnt to see itself as an extension of the state apparatus or virtually a part of the bureaucracy. It has been encouraged in this view by the steady unionisation of the bureaucracy which, for its part, has come to view itself as virtually a federation of unions. But unions are exclusive: they exclude the people, the very people that the public servant, the bureaucrat, is paid to serve. This being so, it is not unreasonable to suppose that a certain mutuality of interest has developed between he bureaucracy and SKOP and has taken the form of a fortress.

Confronted now with a freely elected parliament, both the Executive (the bureaucracy) and SKOP rightly perceive that there will be less and less money available for use in the traditional way. There will be less scope for over-manning, ghost payrolls, inefficiency, "system losses", subsidies and all the other things that have kept this country marking time for the last 20 years. In other words, for the first time in our history, failure is not going to be rewarded.

The Executive arm of state, which has a deep political commitment to itself regardless of the condition of the rest of society, must make common cause with SKOP. If it does not, then the alternative is to go it alone with "pen-down" strikes or "work-to-rule" movements; but the Executive understandably does not wish to attract public attention to itself in this way. A far better means of curbing the policies of an increasing exuberant Legislature is to mobilise and encourage SKOP which is capable of physical and tangible destruction without having to face legal penalties.

In this rendition, SKOP and the Executive have together become a political party in all but name. Given the reality of parliament, all that the power bloc now requires is representation in the Legislature.

Any tendency to bring about a union of political interest between the Legislature and the Executive or between the Legislature and the Judicature must be firmly resisted if a single-party state is not to follow.

Nevertheless, the bloc has a number of alternatives. It can brandish the stick or offer the carrot to any government in power with or without the support of opposition parties or other interest groups because it is secure in the knowledge of its own cohesive strength. But it also knows that it must have the support of parliament in order to cover its gains with the cloak of legitimacy.

The government, on the other hand, is faced with the choice of alienating the bloc and facing the consequences which, inevitably, will throw the bloc into the waiting arms of the opposition, or coming into an armed truce with it. The second alternative is the more realistic, more political one. There is, however, a problem with this policy of appeasement: it offers neither a permanent solution nor a constitutional one.

At this point, it may be asked: "To what extent is the Legislature obliged to cater to the demands of special-interest groups?" One of the answers would probably depend upon the influence that such groups exercise over the electorate or sections of it.

In the present case of a hypothetical bloc, that influence would be very considerable containing, as it does, the seeds of Executive non-compliance and the physical force represented by SKOP and potentially supported by the opposition. But the bloc is not an ordinary special-interest group. It is an arm of the state and, under the constitution, has no political being. What then is its relationship to parliament?

It would seem that parliament has no constitutional right to allow itself to be coerced in any manner by either the Executive or any body associated with it or representing a common interest with it. If parliament succumbs to what it claims to be political reality in the present case, it breaches the constitution and forsakes its primary responsibility to the Electorate. It also imperils its own future.

Any tendency to bring about a union of political interest between the Legislature and the Executive or between the Legislature and the Judicature must be firmly resisted if a single-party state is not to follow. Multi-party democracy goes to the Electorate when faced with a powerful special-interest group; it does not capitulate to such a group at the cost of the tax-paying Electorate.

Over the last few days, the national press has furtively referred to an agreement reached between the government and SKOP. The coverage of this event which has occupied the headlines and preoccupied the private sector for some weeks, is unsatisfactory to say the least. The Electorate has the unquestionable right to know who has agreed to what; and since foreign donors will probably be expected to subsidies or underwrite the agreement, it is only right that they too should know. How much does the country have to pay this time, to weaken parliament?

The author is a well known businessman and a former newscaster on BTV.

Task Forces on Development : Strategies for the 1990's —II

Needed a Process Meaningful to the People

by Md. Anisur Rahman

THERE is also a basic economic question which has not been asked by the Task Forces in charge of the economic fields. Given the imperative need to raise the growth rate of GNP sharply, from the current four per cent or so to the order of 6-8 per cent and to sustain it there, the crucial question is which economic class or classes, and what kind of social formation (e.g., individual or joint initiatives) would have the best potential to generate the needed *surplus* and its productive investment on a continuing basis. Somehow the concerned Task Forces have stopped short of this vital question, and have remained preoccupied with sequences of one-time rises in production and employment which do not *per se* ensure the needed sustained high rate of accumulation and growth. In fact, unless I have missed some statement somewhere in this 1500-1600 page set of reports, the only place where a concern for surplus generation appears is in the report of the Task Force on Technology, which recommends a move away from tiny rural cottage industries to small-scale rural industrialization explicitly out of a consideration for surplus maximization, a line of enquiry which should have been a central element in the deliberations of all the Task Forces facing the growth challenge. This is a challenge to discover where the accumulation drive of the society might lie, and to enquire how the best potentials in this respect could be tapped. It is not at all clear — the logic has not been drawn — that the totality of recommendations of the Task Forces promiss a transition to the desired order of the overall growth rate.

From this point of view, the thesis of "declining importance of land reform" in view of the land-people ratio presented by the Task Force on Poverty Alleviation, and the implicit support to this thesis by the Task Forces on Food and Agriculture and Land Administration do not also address the above crucial question. The control of agricultural assets must come in the hands of a high surplus-generating class of producers under an appropriate social formation. This means, I suggest, some form of group farming, storage, marketing and loan operation by the direct producers in agriculture, in order to reap the benefits of economies of scale and cooperation, and also to stimulate the collective self mobilization of the peasantry to go on directly transforming their labour into (infrastructural) capital — a form of instantaneous surplus generation and its investment. Such social formations could also reduce the aggregate costs of meeting the consumption needs of the concerned population and thereby generate more surplus by various kinds of cooperative services — e.g. cooperative stores, education and health facilities, social insurance, etc. — initiated by such groups. This is what I see as the more important potential of the class-organizations of the land-poor in the countryside to which the Task Force on Poverty Alleviation and a number of other Task Force have made references, indicating a direction of agrarian reform which has become a matter of sheer arithmetic compulsion for us.

At the very mundane level of immediate concrete action, I would single out the priority given by the Task Force on Energy to spread the use of improved stoves as of vital importance for the health of almost half of our population and for conservation of rapidly depleting biomass fuel. This recommendation of the Task Force can be taken up by the entire society for implementing action without waiting for "development assistance" or policy decisions from above. I understand that Grameen Bank's field experiments with such stoves indicate that there are still some gaps between the design of such stoves and the specific sources of fuel that low-income village women can access, and hence some redesigning of the stoves may be necessary. The designers of such stoves, and other relevant competent quarters, may be urged to quickly respond to this experience. I would also mention an omission of another encouraging development — the technology for producing "spirulina", a powerful nutrition supplement, is now in our hands, thanks to the dedicated women scientists in the BCSIR who completed their successful research for the adaptation of this technology about the same time that the nation entered into the present phase of rebirth of political democracy. This signals a breakthrough on the nutrition front which is now ready for commercial production. The same scientists are now experimenting to discover a technology to have this algae produced in every household of the country. They deserve every encouragement and support in their effort which hopefully will give all development agencies, social activists and the media another massive piece of task by way of taking the spirulina technology to every door in the country as has been done e.g., with oral saline.

As for the other tasks outlined by the Task Force addressed mainly to the policy makers, the basic problem of the negative superstructure remains. We have no indication that the dedicated work of the nation's best professionals has made any impression on the concerned quarters. The reason for this is contained in the Task Forces' reports as already suggested. In this framework the most valuable suggestion in the whole set of reports, again to be taken up by social action groups, remains that in the Reports on the Role of Political Parties and on Poverty Alleviation, toward working for the creation and strengthening of social and class organizations to articulate and assert the point of view of the majority of the people and to take collective development initiatives themselves. Short of this, a development process in the country meaningful to the people will not even begin. With such popular forces emerging, the role of our professionals would be to address and work directly with these forces, and to help them with those information and analyses which professionals might be in a more advantageous position to collect and process, in order to strengthen the capability of such forces to lead and lift the society.

The most valuable suggestion remains that without working for the creation and strengthening of social and class organisations to articulate and assert the point of view of the majority of the people ..... a development process meaningful to the people will not even begin.

Meanwhile, the nation owes a big "thank you" to the Task Force for their work, in particular for alerting all about the gravity of the economic and social state of affairs. It has been a particular pleasure to read the reports of the Task Force on Technology and on Environment which both make an integrated analysis of economic, environmental and technological dimensions of our development problem, attempts, which enlighten all by showing the essential interrelation between these disciplines.

Even if some other individual Task Force have not been able to face the "general equilibrium" challenge (economic, social, environmental) of a search for a development strategy that will spark off a high growth rate which could be socially and ecologically sustainable, their contributions are nevertheless very valuable, first as a source of information; secondly as a debating point; and thirdly, by revealing gaps in the current lines of economic enquiries which urgently call for new directions of research — most importantly, (1) to enquire into the surplus-generating character and potentials of different economic classes and socio-economic formations and of interventions to promote local-level development or poverty alleviation, and (2) incorporation of environmental cost-benefits in the economic calculus, and enquiry into the means of ensuring that these cost-benefits have their due weight in guiding action. And finally the reports as a whole serve to underline the urgency of total mobilization of our scientists for the needed technological breakthrough to achieve ecologically sustainable development.

Concluded

Angola : Giving Orphans a Future

*Angola faces the massive problem of reintegrating 50,000 orphaned and abandoned children, a legacy of 16 years of civil war. **Vicki Finkel** of IPS reports from Huambo, Angola.*

FOR years, Angola's orphaned and abandoned children were provided a home of some kind in the cramped, isolated, and ill-quipped orphanages of Huambo province. These institutions, however, give them little emotional or material support.

But now all that is going to change with the national family tracing and placement programme aimed at reuniting the children with their families or, failing that, giving them a start on an independent life.

"Our objective is a complete reintegration package," says Maggie Brown of the Save the Children UK.

Brown is actively working with the government's Social Welfare Department (SEAS) workers to reunite war-affected children in institutions with their families or substitute families in order to normalise their lives.

As a consequence of the southern African country's 16-year civil war, and resultant socio-economic collapse, approximately 50,000 children have been separated from their families.

"It is very important that children do not stay in the orphanages," said Albilio Chivala, SEAS head of Lunduimbali municipality, about 90 km from the central provincial capital of Huambo.

"In institutions, children are growing completely dependent, without any initiative and will and have a difficult time entering the community," added Chivala, who saved the lives of about 70 children during the civil war.

When the Lunduimbali orphanage was attacked by National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (Unita) rebels in February, Chivala escaped with all of the children, walking two days with them to relative safety.

With the ceasefire ending the devastating conflict in May, many parents have been actively seeking their children and about 700 children have already been placed with families.

But programme organisers acknowledge that it will be impossible to locate families for all of the children, especially the older ones who throughout their lives have practically been dumped from one orphanage to another.

When tracing fails in difficult cases, another strategy is planned to avoid an otherwise dark future for many of the poorly educated children.

"We do not want to risk the very dangerous situation where a lot of these children are roaming the streets causing problems," said Brown.

Signs of this potential delinquency are evident in many of the roughly 120 state children's homes.

Many young children at the Girasol orphanage in Kaala, about 30km from Huambo, now suffer a double trauma. After living through nightmares in the war, often witnessing the murder of family members, they now are terrorised by older children, according to orphanage administrators.

Chronic violence and indiscipline in the orphanage keep younger children from getting the clothes and other material assistance given by donor groups.

"At 05:00 hours in the morning, many of the older children have already left to sell things in the market," said Girasol director, Norton Faustino.

Faustino has been holding weekly meetings with the older children in the orphanage to stimulate them into thinking about building their independent futures.

"I tell them than they are men now and have to think of how they will live away from here," said Faustino.

But he admits that the institutions are partly to blame for the lack of initiative among the orphans "because we never trained them properly".

As part of the family localisation programme, many of the older children are aided and encouraged to build their own houses in existing communities.

Carpentry teachers have been arranged through the construction ministry. With a dearth of private construction jobs in Huambo, skilled masters have the time and desire to help the children in one of the hardest hit provinces during the war.

"Our project aims to dynamise these largely unmotivated young people, and offer them something positive by investing their own labour in it," said Brown.

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.

"BUET situation"

Sir, I was really surprised to see a letter about BUET situation in 25th December The Daily Star. A guardian suggested in that letter that BUET students can compensate the teachers' loss incurred by the incident. As for myself I felt extremely sorry for the incident and at the loss of our teachers' property. But I cannot understand how a guardian proposed such a unreasonable may to make up the losses ? The BUET students are not at all responsible for the incident; why they will be penalised for the fault not of their own ? Why the BUET authority will be responsible to pay compensation to the teachers as well ? Is there no government in Bangladesh ? Has it no responsibility to look after the safety and security of the citizens ? It is rather the government's responsibility to pay compensation to the teachers.

Students have been demanding to increase their stipend for a long period : the BUET authority does not give us excess stipend from their fund ! Why now any kind of BUET fund will be utilized to compensate the personal loss of teachers ? Students will surely protest against any attempt of this kind of situation.

A student
BUET, Dhaka.

New one-Taka coin

Sir, Where to see and buy a new one-Taka coin ? Is it legal tender ? Can I buy one for one Taka, or for four dollars ? I'd like to send it to some friends abroad. Is it illegal to send legal tender by post ?

Publicity please.

Curious
Dhaka.

Hospital and negligence

Sir, Late poet Thomas Ansell some years back changed the title of one of my stories submitted to an English newspaper's young readers' page of which he was the editor. The story was published under the caption— "Death is no respecter". By stating this above incident, I actually want to put emphasis on the fact that 'death is no respecter of a person'. Death is an absolute truth and no living organism can avoid it. But we feel greatly sorry when we see or heard that someone had to die for the negligence of the doctors or other people.

Recently I gathered from a letter published in a Bangla daily that one of our friends Krishibid Mizanur Rahman had to meet a tragic end of his life at the Suhrawardy Hospital, Dhaka. As reported, Mr Rahman in the night of the 19th November felt pain on his chest. He himself walked to the Suhrawardy Hospital along with his mother and sister. Unfortunately no doctor was available in the 'Emergency' at that time. One technician tried to give him oxygen by inserting a tube into his nostril. But this reacted adversely and Mr Rahman died within a minute or two!

Now the writers of the letter have posed a question — "Who is responsible for this death?" I, along with many others, would also like to leave the same question before the authority to investigate and answer.

M. Zahidul Haque
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