

UNESCO in Bangladesh

There comes a piece of good news from the Paris headquarters of UNESCO. A recent announcement says that the UN body has approved \$50,000 grant to help Bangladesh build cyclone-resistant school buildings. With this initial grant — not massive at all in terms of the need — UNESCO will seek international assistance to pay for 100,000 classrooms in the country over a 10-year period, costing an estimated 88 million.

In some ways, other aid agencies have already become involved in this new project. At the request of the OPEC Fund for International Development, UNESCO undertook a mission to Bangladesh in September to prepare the project, especially for primary schools damaged during the April cyclone, estimated at 60 per cent of the total lower-level educational institutions in the area. The project and the design of the school, prepared by a noted UNESCO architect John Beynon, have already evoked interest among other aid agencies, such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), within the framework of the country's longer term education programme.

In effect, the launching of the project has been long overdue. It was soon after his appointment as the new Director General of the UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1988, that Dr Frederico Mayor pledged to set up a special fund for Bangladesh — this country was specifically mentioned — for the rehabilitation of the educational system damaged by floods which had just hit the country. On paper, the special fund was probably set up. However, as far as we know, nothing much happened by way of generating international support for this programme.

It might have been a different story had the UNESCO carried out its plan for setting up a sub-regional office for education in Dhaka, first promised in early eighties by its then Director General, Amadou Mahtar M'bow and later reiterated by the present head, Dr Mayor, in 1989. The request for the establishment of the office came from Dhaka, which was based on the simple logic that the organisation should have a direct presence where it is needed most, especially in the campaign against illiteracy. With its proximity to Nepal and Bhutan, Bangladesh seemed — and still seems — an ideal location.

In this region, UNESCO offices are located in Beijing, in Jakarta (for science and technology for South East Asia), in Kuala Lumpur (for communication), in New Delhi (for science and technology for South Asia) and in Karachi (for Book Development Programme and Communication in South Asia), not to mention the organisation's much larger integrated regional office in Bangkok. Since much of the work of UNESCO concerns the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in the organisation's areas of responsibility, there is certainly a case for setting up a sub-regional office in Dhaka, or if it is not possible, for transferring one of the existing offices in this region to this country.

Whatever moves are taken by UNESCO, the authorities here should be prepared to provide the organisation with all possible assistance, from offering it appropriate premises to supplying it with other logistical support. In this context, the idea of placing all the UN offices under one roof deserves careful consideration.

Where the interests of this country are concerned, UNESCO is certainly full of good intentions, reflected in many of its good plans, from the development of the country's education programme to the preservation of its archaeological sites, from assisting media organisations in the field of training to the preparation of modernisation programmes for news agencies.

Many of these plans have been pushed under the carpet due to paucity of funds which, in turn, is due to the delay of two major donors, the United States and Britain, which left UNESCO in mid-eighties, to return to the organisation. The two countries which together met over 30 per cent of UNESCO's annual budget were concerned about increasing alleged politicisation of UNESCO. This is no longer the case. Both Washington and London may be now watching Dr Mayor's management style from outside. Even if they are not entirely happy with the way the Spanish chief handles the affairs of UNESCO, it is infinitely better to be inside the organisation than to be outside, more for the sake of countries which need UNESCO than for Dr Mayor.

US Living Standard and Bush Rating

The Americans will not relish what their business leaders have to say about the future of their country's economy. Anaemic already, the US economy is one area where the Bush administration is likely to hit the minefield, bringing an abrupt end to the incumbent president's another shot at the White House. Bush's popularity rating, which soared as high as 90 per cent during the multinational campaign against Saddam Hussein, has gone down since then. So far as US foreign policy is concerned, his is a success unrivalled perhaps by any of the Western leaders this century.

But unfortunately, the same is not ably matched by the domestic policies Bush administration could so far come up with. His latest visit to Japan was mostly aimed to lessen the economic pinch through a workable partnership with that country which is enjoying a 41 billion dollar trade surplus. How far that mission has been successful is not known; but his countrymen have not been so much convinced. His latest popularity rating (as low as 27 per cent) should be a good enough indication.

Now that the business leaders' forecast is grimmer, the president with a failing health can only hope for anything but the best. After all, the failure in domestic matters, because that is going to directly affect the American living standard, will weigh heavily in the presidential campaign against Bush. And a strong foreign policy is not a substitute for a weak policy on the home front.

Signs are clear that the business community, which has a considerable clout in the making and unmaking of presidents, seems to be wary of the president. They are perhaps looking for a new leadership, if not for anything else then at least for a customary change. Whether the Democratic Party will be able to provide a welcome change is however another matter. But not everything is lost for Bush yet, let alone his fate being sealed. You never know how the unexpected happens in politics. Who knows, Bush may have some rare luck to savour!

CO-OPERATION AMONG SOUTH ASIAN NATIONS

Developments and Changes Foster New Climate

by Prof. Kabir Chowdhury and Dr. Selim Jahan

In the decade of the 90s, we are witnessing strong winds of change sweeping through the entire world. The dramatic changes embrace political, social and economic fields. The winds of change are generally exerting a positive influence but not in every case and everywhere.

World is clearly reflected in the countries of South Asia. Almost every country of this region suffers from a certain lack of political stability. Various political problems with their neighbours plague many of them. The traditional enmity between India and Pakistan has lessened but not been eliminated. Bangladesh has problems with India over the sharing of waters, with Pakistan over receiving its legitimate share of assets and over the return of the non-Bengali population who had opted for Pakistan at the end of the Liberation War.

Problems

Nepal and India have problems over trade and commerce which are in the process of settlement. The unauthorised entry of large numbers of Nepalese into the southern region of Bhutan is causing some problems to the latter country. In spite of a peace treaty being signed between India and Sri Lanka the relationship between the two countries cannot yet be termed as particularly cordial. When some time back a contingent of hired mercenaries sailed from Sri Lanka and invaded the Maldives and made an abortive bid to occupy the island, the relationship between the two countries greatly deteriorated and the atmosphere of distrust then generated has not yet cleared. If the countries are taken separately, one finds many disturbing things there too. India is bedeviled by problems in Kashmir, Assam and the Punjab; it has serious problems over terrorist activities and the resurgence of fundamentalism and communal feelings. In Pakistan, too, there are problems of inter sectarian differences and also devious political manoeuvrings. In Sri Lanka there is the resistant quarrel between the Tamil and the Sinhalese in addition to

the wave of killings and destruction perpetuated by the Tamil liberation fighters. In Bangladesh, after the collapse of a long dictatorial regime that bled the country white, a healthy democratic process is trying to get a foot hold. While all this is going on, we also notice a number of disarming things as well.

From the social angle, we find that in many countries of South Asia the traditional values of the East of liberal humanism, tolerance, harmonious co-existence of peoples of diverse religions and of intellectual freedom are being corroded. Sharp polarizations are taking place in the social structures, the young are being increasingly drawn to the unsavoury aspects of the affluent western civilization, drug addiction has become a major problem; violent unrests on the campuses have become a routine affair.

In the economic arena, we see that all the South Asian countries are not on the same level, nor do they pursue a uniform path or policy of economic development. Pakistan and Bangladesh believe in the economy of open market, free enterprise, unbridled competition and capitalist development. Sri Lanka's economic philosophy emphasizes its commitment of fulfilling the minimum basic human needs. India by and large, pursued, till recently, an inward-looking welfare oriented economic policy directed towards attaining economic self-sufficiency, but some time ago, the new government of India indicated a shift favouring a more open economic policy, more in time with the path of capitalist growth and development. It is clear that India has already become an economic power, demanding and getting respectful treatment. The growth rate of Pakistan is also fairly remarkable. But in comparison

Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives have long way to go.

Rich Traditions

All the countries of South Asia share in very rich traditions which come from the same sources. The same roots. There was clear homogeneity in their social, cultural and economic life. In course of time, yielding to the logic of circumstances and historical realities they drifted apart. New nation states were born, different economic approaches were followed, socio-cultural activities took different routes. Yet there still runs an underlying thread of unity which external powers often try to weaken and disrupt in order to further their own interests. We must, on our part, try to strengthen these bonds of unity, for it is in the collective interest of us all.

In the social sphere the self-sufficient rural society was at the heart of their social structures. There was a relationship of inter-dependence between the villages and the cities and not of exploitation. In the economic sphere too, there was close cooperation and interaction through trade and commerce among the countries of this region. Agriculture and village based cottage industries were the mainstays of all their economic activities. From very ancient times, trade and commerce involving cloth, crops, spices and various handicrafts went on among the countries of this region enriching the economy of all concerned.

Politically, we all know that the Indian subcontinent was once a unified geo-political entity. As a result of various historical processes that unified entity no longer exists. Now India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan exist as separate and independent nation states. Nevertheless we are bound to

each other by geography and history, and while pursuing our separate paths of progress and development, we must not forget our identical roots. The divisive trends and narrow aggressive nationalist activities must not be encouraged. In particular, we must not make the mistake of making religion the kingpin of our nationalism. It should always be remembered that we are really made of many peoples, speaking various languages, following different religions, and yet our strength lies in our feelings of unity based on democratic values on our belief in the efficacy of friendship and cooperation, and on the unavoidable need for peace and economic well-being.

Colonies

For hundreds of years the countries of South Asia existed only as a colony for various foreign powers. During that period the former served both as a rich source house of raw materials and as a market for the finished products. The colonial masters, for their own administrative purposes created here a class of middlemen whose main task was to safeguard the interest of their foreign masters and to obtain the benefits of the intermediary for themselves.

The seed of distrust and rivalry among the countries of this subcontinent largely lay in the manner of its partition in 1947 and the philosophy underlying that action. Taking advantage of the atmosphere of distrust and rivalry the imperialistic powers started to exploit this region for their own political purposes.

For US imperialism and its colleagues, the importance of South Asia is mainly centered around India and the Indian ocean. When in the 50s India, Egypt, Yugoslavia and Indonesia took the initiative to start the non-aligned movement, the US super power did not like it. Later, when India

began to build up closer cooperation with USSR that, too, displeased the US. The US's concern was on two counts. Firstly, as a result of India's role the region might go under the sphere of influence of USSR, and secondly, India herself might become a kind of regional super-power. This concern led to the presence of UN nuclearship and military set-up in this area and the plans to set up Pakistan as a counter power against India. During the 50s, when military alliances like SEATO and CENTO came into existence here, Pakistan was the only country of this region to join them. The US went on giving large scale military aid to Pakistan justifying its action by maintaining that it was necessary for preserving the balance of power in the subcontinent.

The presence of nuclear war-heads in the Indian ocean and the establishment of permanent US military base in Diego Garcia island are permanent threats to the peace and security of this region.

One may also recall in this context that as a result of imperialistic machinations war broke out between India and Pakistan in the forties and the sixties. Later in 1971, India was again attacked by Pakistan, the latter receiving encouragement from the open support given by the US and China to the military junta of Pakistan during the Liberation War of the Bengalees. However, after the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign and independent nation, the presence of India as a sort of regional power was indirectly recognized by the US. But towards the end of the 70s, as a result of the happenings in Afghanistan the presence of the US in the Indian ocean zone again became an important issue for the US administration as it wanted to maintain uninterrupted oil supplies to its allies in East Asia, and also check probable intrusion of USSR in the oil rich countries of West Asia. Even after the withdrawal of the Soviet army from Afghanistan the anxiety and fears of the US in this regard has not completely vanished. (To be concluded tomorrow.)

The Gambles Yeltsin is taking with the Price Rises

Charles Quist Adade writes from St. Petersburg

Price liberalisation in Russia is causing President Boris Yeltsin huge problems. Shops are without basic food items such as eggs, meat and apples and consumer goods sell at astronomical prices. Opinion polls suggest that only 32 per cent of Russians now support economic liberalisation while 78 per cent blame worsening living conditions on high prices. Gemini News Service reports on the difficulties facing the new leaders in Moscow.

THE new year price liberalisation embarked on by the Yeltsin administration led to a bizarre phenomenon. The number of stray dogs and cats running the streets of St. Petersburg rose sharply on the third day of the price rises.

Hard-up pet owners unable to afford expensive animal feed were already throwing their pets away back in April when Premier Valentin Pavlov increased prices of basic consumer goods by 200-300 per cent.

Pets spared by their owners in April have not been so lucky this time round. Many were thrown out on to the streets as their owners realised that the so-called Pavlovian Syndrome — a situation where government raises prices to get hoarded goods back into the shops, but shops remain as empty as before — was about to repeat itself.

Three days after the new prices came into force I window-shopped and found that while the streets were full of stray dogs and cats and many brands of imported beer and shampoos were on sale, there was no food.

That appears to be one of the absurdities of the situation in the former Soviet Union. Private traders prefer to deal in clothes, chewing gum and canned beer but not in food items, although demand for food is very high.

Shops here were without basic food items such as eggs, meat, animal fat, proteins, sausages, and apples while the few items on the shelves like

vegetable oil, bread and cream were selling at astronomical prices. For example, on January 2 vegetables, cream and oranges were selling at 24 roubles, 40-50 roubles and 19-20 roubles per kilo respectively.

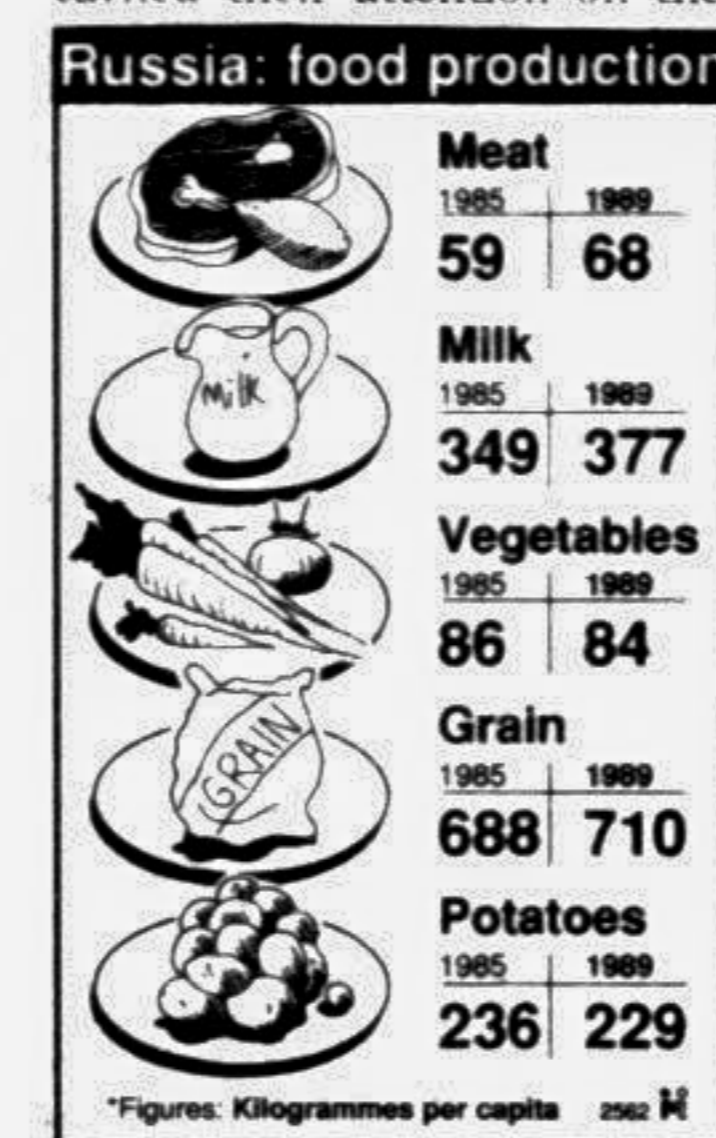
More than 65 per cent of Russians — average take-home pay of 350 roubles — can hardly scrape a living. For most pensioners and unemployed the new prices will mean what the Russians call "sitting on bread and milk" all day long.

Says bus driver Yuri Kalfonov, 37: "Our wages (my wife's and mine) were doubled just before the price rise. We now receive 1,200 roubles together. But the new prices make nonsense of the wage increase. This chicken feed is only enough for family food. How am I going to clothe my wife and child?"

Pensioners are equally hard hit. Iger Kirilleve, 67 — monthly pension 400 roubles — sounded optimistic and resigned at the same time: "I'm frugal. I think I can manage with my pension. I'm fed up with the doomsday predictions being thrown about. We did not live by bread alone in the past. We're not going to live by

bread alone now either."

Former sales assistant Inessa Ivanovna is furious with the democrats: "They are nothing but nihilists. They destroyed the communists and the system and now they have turned their attention on the



masses." Ivanovna is just 50. She believes history will pass the "hardest verdict on this pack of pseudodemocrats."

If the fury of Ivanovna was

publicly expressed, that of millions of her compatriots may be insidious. Opinion polls published in the Nevskoe Vermo indicate increasing numbers are getting exasperated with the democrats.

Only four per cent said they were satisfied with democratic rule. Perhaps more worrying for Yeltsin and his team of shock-therapists is the revelation that only 32 per cent of Russians now support price liberalisation.

About 78 per cent blame worsening living conditions on price rises. And 50 per cent now say they supported the botched August coup.

Another opinion poll said that most Russians between 35-65 years believe life was far better under Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev than under Gorbachev and the democrats. Nostalgia for the good old days, of serenity and stability and relative abundance is strongest among citizens above pension age.

If poll results are any indication, observers say, the future bodies ill for the democrats. That could mean mass support for a new team of putschists if they promise in-

stant price freezing and stabilisation of the supply situation.

Yeltsin's Vice-President, Alexander Rutskel, has mounted a strong attack on the price liberalisation strategy worked out by Prime Minister Iger Gaidar and a team of Harvard economists.

It should come, he contends, after privatisation of state property, dismantling of monopolistic structures and pruning of the corrupt and unwieldy bureaucracy.

Otherwise, the mafia, already enmeshed with the monopolistic distributive systems, will continue in existence, creating artificial shortages to glean fat profits at the expense of the ordinary people.

Although former general and Afghan war hero Rutskel vehemently denies it, speculation is persistent that he is plotting together with some communists to overthrow Yeltsin. Rutskel has called Yeltsin's youthful ministers "teenagers in group-up men's trousers."

He complains he has been pushed off the decision-making process in the government by Premier Gaidar.

Price reforms were long overdue, but fear of

"proletarian anger" prevented Gorbachev axing state subsidies in an economy constricted by inefficiency and large-scale waste.

Economic forecasts suggest that although more wild price jumps are not expected on top of the January 1 rises, the Pavlovian syndrome is bound to haunt the Yeltsin administration for some time.

The dismembering of the Soviet Empire has led to destruction of horizontal economic ties among former Soviet republics and left the Russian economy a lame duck.

Despite everything, many Russians are expected to stay largely unruffled by the price rise. Most filled their freezers and fridges with two months' food reserves when Yeltsin mooted the price increases last October.

Trouble for the government is likely to brew when they exhaust their reserves and face the empty shelves in the local grocery stores.

Yeltsin and his lieutenants are bracing for the mass anger. They plan to bring the two security services, the former KGB and the militia, under one umbrella to enable swift mobilisation in case of social disorder.

The stakes are high, the risks enormous. But Gaidar, counting on massive western food aid, dismissed ominous forecasts. He told the Izvestia daily: "The future will bring us... a lot of good."

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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.

Save "Rohingyas"

Sir, Nobody I believe has yet clearly stated the pathetic history of the unprotected Muslims of Arakan, known as Rohingyas. Those people had to become aliens in their own soil today. Through an analytical comment of the available history of the minority, it is vividly found that nowhere the minorities are so inhumanly treated as in Burma.

More than seventeen times, illegal armed operations against them had been conducted as a pretext for inquiries under immigration acts. In recent days, an appeal

issued by the Bangladesh association of human rights expressed the genocide of Arakanese Muslims as a matter of grave concern for the world communities. This requires urgent attention, otherwise, I understand, the Burmese rulers will eliminate the Muslims of Arakan.

The new Rohingya refugee exodus into Bangladesh started from Jan 91, and now their number has crossed 70,000. Similar to those of the Palestinians in Israel and Kashmiris, the problem of the Rohingyas are the result of forcible dispossession of their

population and their expulsion from their homeland by means of persecution and genocide.

The recent tactics adopted by the Burmans and "Maghs" (Rakhine) jointly aim at annihilation of the Muslims, at the final stage, through destruction of age-old settlement and usurping all their economic resources, blocking business sources and movement from one district to another district.

Dhaka is fully committed to peace and amity with neighbours. It wants peaceful solution of the issue. On the other hand, according to daily reports, many refugees have died due to starvation and diseases in the couple of days. It is learnt, the death toll might rise if food stuff, medicine and clothes were not timely reached. The government should give utmost priority to shelter the refugees providing them needful necessities immediately.

The government, on repa-

triation and solution, may not have an easy job on hand.

But these Burmese citizens must be recognised unequivocally like other national groups in Burma. They had rich historical heritage and glorious past and, are a separate ethnic community in Arakan, with distinct religion, culture, civilisation and language of their own. The Arakan, was once a land of Muslims, a sultanate state, but was later occupied by the "Maghs" who in turn invited Burmese king Bodaw Pya in 1784. Since Burma attained independence in 1948, it was turned out to be a curse and hell for the "Rohingyas". About 1.2 million Rohingyas so far had been expelled and are wandering as uncared for refugees in many countries of the world, particularly, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, the Middle-East, Thailand and Malaysia.

The land of these Arakanese Muslims must not be depleted.

The exodus should be stopped. Security and solution must be met thereon. The existence of the Muslims of Arakan must be safeguarded.

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Finance Act 1991

Sir, I refer you to the letter of Mr Anisur Rahman on Finance Act 1991 published in your paper on 31st December last. Frankly speaking, by his letter Mr Rahman has expressed not only his views on the matter, but he has very cogently expressed the views of many others. Indeed the new Section 53 H in the Income Tax Act has placed a transfer of property in a great predicament and he has now become a sufferer to the extreme, being forced to more financial difficulties, harass-

ments and loss of time. There is a popular saying "the wearer best knows where the shoe pinches". So a seller knows how and to what degree the new Section 53 H has added to his sufferings.

Mr Rahman has rightly said that after registration, collection of tax will pose a great problem and in many cases become impossible. This will happen particularly in the case of holders of joint property. The delay in obtaining the TP certificate from the Income Tax officer was attributed by the Finance Minister as the reason for enacting Section 53 H and as explained by Mr Rahman this can well be solved by prescribing a time limit, say two months, by which the ITO must issue the TP certificate.

Agreeing with Mr Rahman we suggest abolition of Section 53 H.

Moniruzzaman
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