

ASEAN in a New Era

In place of hesitation which had characterized many of the moves of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the past, there now appears visible forward thinking in the six-nation alliance in both political and economic fields.

In their political field, the most significant move is the acceptance by the ministerial meeting of a formal offer from Vietnam and Laos to sign a treaty of friendship and amity with the six-nation grouping, hopefully by the end of this year.

It is still too early to say how the growing political understanding between the former Indo-China states — Vietnam and Laos — on the one hand and members of ASEAN on the other will affect the balance of power in the region.

In immediate terms, it is the economic potential of what looks like an expanded ASEAN that will prove most attractive to the region.

Another move, approved by the ministerial meeting in Singapore, relates to the setting up of a free trade zone which, as a process, is due to get off to a start with the establishment of a Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) scheme.

It is obvious that ASEAN does not want to embark on free trade zone concept too quickly. The alliance's past experience in economic co-operation, especially in the setting up of joint industrial ventures, has never been too satisfactory.

Diplomatic missions of SAARC countries, based in Singapore, should monitor and evaluate these new developments in ASEAN, not only as a learning experience but also from the point of view of establishing new linkages between the two groupings.

Local Trouble

Village politics in Bangladesh is not for the faint-hearted. That much was understood in 1987 when over 200 people were killed in widespread violence during the last Union Parishad (UP) polls.

That, however, is where the euphoria ends. Since the parliamentary elections of February 27, 1991, when the country enjoyed a novel experience of peaceful and fraud-free polling, we have rightfully set our standard higher than it was in the past.

The question to ask, quite naturally, is, if it was possible back in February last year, then why shouldn't it be possible every other time? That was the expectation, and within that context, the degree of violence and attempted fraud at these UP polls have been way above the level of acceptability.

The most powerful deterrent against polls violence, in addition to vigilance from the forces of law and order, remains the people themselves. It has come as no surprise to observe that wherever popular participation in these polls has been widespread and spontaneous, the level of violence and fraud too has been minimal.

Chittagong: A Chapter in the Story of Mistakes

THE Chittagong case should be an eye-opener for all future policy-makers. I am writing in continuation of what I wrote last time in this column. I hope my readers will remember what I said in The Exit of a Vice-Chancellor. I did not suggest that the removal of a Vice-Chancellor was entirely unprecedented, only that this was a more unjust and perhaps unwarranted action than any previous instance of removal.

Why did I say that the Chittagong case should serve as a warning to those who in future will bring forth other universities? The primary role of a university in this part of the world has traditionally been perceived as teaching.

The University of Dhaka (1921) set the pattern. By the time Dhaka was established, Calcutta had already discarded its purely affiliating role. Originally, it was designed, along with universities of Madras and Bombay, to be no more than an examining body, and to play the shepherd's role for the flock of colleges.

Calcutta thus was transformed and elevated into what has been described as a teaching-cum-affiliating university. Madras, incidentally, has been content with Ph. D. level work and only that. What course

Bombay has followed. I do not know and in the absence of a reference book on my table at the moment, I will not hazard any guess.

Administrative Bog

At the Partition of India, Dhaka University, till then a purely teaching and unitary university, had to take over the affiliation part of Calcutta's function, thus converting itself overnight into a teaching-cum-affiliating university.

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

failed to make necessary adjustments and got deeper and deeper into an administrative bog.

Two courses were left open to the university, to save its spirit and retain its functional efficiency — one to extricate itself from the business of affiliation and to persuade the government to make other arrangements of affiliation; two, to drop the undergraduate work, and limit itself to Master's and doctoral programme.

I still think that the government of the day committed a capital blunder not to have given thought to this problem which was to have proved our first university's undoing in future.

The Commission on National Education in its report (1959), while touching on many aspects of higher education, failed to realise this particular one, and had no suggestion to offer. The Commission, of course, saw the possibility, and also the desirability of founding a few more universities in both the wings of Pakistan. It indicated

Exercise in Futility

Affiliating university is going to be an experiment, may be an exercise in futility. It certainly is a return to a discarded idea, at least on the face of it. If proper management of the colleges is the aim, this is not going to be cost-effective. The academic structure that has been proposed in the scheme will give it respectability will be a difficult thing to set up. But it has one strong recommendation in this favour: it will re-leave the three universities of Dhaka, Rajshahi and Chittagong from an additional worry. But that will be a negative achievement. How much, and in what way the colleges will profit under the new dispensation, is not clear yet.

Unfortunately, as we had later universities appearing on the scene, Rajshahi in 1954, Chittagong in 1965, BUET and BAU in 1962, Jahangirnagar in 1970, Islamic in 1984, Shah Jalal (Sylhet) in 1986, and Khulna in 1990, the basic issues on the structure and character of the proposed institution did not receive proper scrutiny and study. An attempt was made in the case of Khulna, but the study was not carried to its logical conclusions. In fact, whatever groundwork was done under the auspices of a committee set up by the University Grants

Commission, came to nothing when the university was formally inaugurated.

This happens when policy-makers suffer from amnesia. In the case of Chittagong, there was tug of war over the choice of a site. The site finally chosen has been the cause of much future agony. Apart from a higher construction cost the university has to incur compared to other places, conveyance of students and faculty members to and from the campus entailed both cost and trouble which even the construction of a railway link just to serve the university has not fully eliminated. A campus closer to the city would have been a much saner idea but sanity in choosing a common-sensical site was again abandoned in the choice of a site for the so-called Islamic University. I beg not to be misunderstood. I can understand an Institute of Islamic Studies, attached to a university or fully autonomous, but to label a university as Islamic with the sole idea of receiving funds from the Middle-East was as preposterous as choosing a site, half in Jessore and half in Kushtia to placate feelings of two districts by a single act. Eccentric notions at work, both at Chittagong and at Shantidanga-Dulapur has taken and will continue to take a heavy toll. The malaise of Chittagong University has many causes. Its campus not the least among them. In its not so splendid isolation, the university has only thrived in crime and violence.

Maldives Shuts down Papers, Locks up Journalists

THE Maldives, a garland of more than 1,200 islands bursting with multi-coloured coral set in the sparkling Indian Ocean, seems the very image of paradise.

Jaded westerners are eager to spend their money on the country's beaches and provide about one-fifth of country's gross domestic product.

Despite the surface tranquillity, hard-line politics underline the Maldives (population 60,000) like the volcanic ridge the islands rest on.

In November 1990 newspaper editor Mohamed Shafeeq was arrested and reportedly placed in stocks, accused of "terrorism". The following month, a retroactive Prevention of Terrorism Act with a possible death penalty was passed, in disregard of international human rights standards.

At least seven other journalists from independent magazines, including Mohamed Nashed, were arrested at the same time.

Shafeeq, known to his friends as Sappe, is a well-known, charismatic figure in the Maldives. A talented architecture graduate, he founded the independent weekly newspaper Sangu in January 1990. Sangu contained exposes of alleged official corruption among items on health issues, poverty and sport.

The new Maldivian government, elected after a 1988 coup attempt, promised greater freedom and the independent press had begun to flourish. In 1990 the government fought back, alleging the arrested journalists had been involved in the coup attempt.

Journalists also claimed their phones were tapped on government orders and Sangu was confiscated for a short time in March 1990. Sappe

The Maldives is a country of contrasts: exotic and beautiful for its tourists; repressive and censored for its citizens. Journalists who criticise the government are imprisoned under harsh conditions. But the government of the small Indian Ocean archipelago may be forced to heed the calls for democracy being heard around the world.

by Mandy Garner

said he came close to being arrested in April. However, the independent newspapers were proving more popular with the public.

The first issue of Sangu sold out in a week and people were lining up for new copies within months.

In May, when President Abdul Gayoom was forced to dismiss a member of his cabinet, the government took criticism of this minister as an attack on the whole parliament and the backlash began.

An article written by Nashed in the April issue of Sangu compared the headline backlash with the Chinese government's crackdown on dissent in Tiananmen Square. The article claims: "Their (the hardliners) only aim is to brand those who are working for equality, those who want to know the truth, as traitors..."

"Abuse of human rights, torture in prisons, inequality and corruption have become the norm. They are in danger of becoming part of our culture."

In June, Gayoom ordered the closure of Sangu and two other independent magazines, Manthiri and Hukuru. Sappe and others planned to get around this banning order by using printing presses from

Singapore. Sappe reported receiving death threats and predicted his arrest to friends. In a September 1990 letter he wrote: "If they can't find any reason for my arrest then they will frame me... The government wants to clean up the place before the SAARC summit this November."

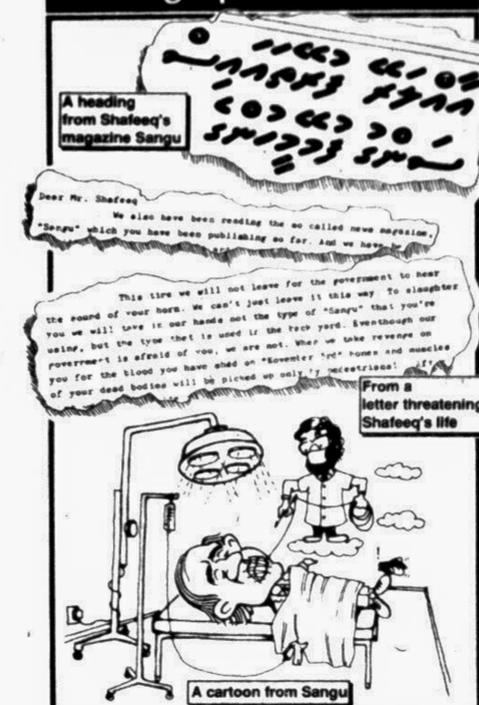
The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was due to meet in Male in November. It is thought Sappe and the other journalists were arrested to stop dissenting voices reaching the ears of visiting foreign journalists.

During the summit, the capital, Male, was put under night curfew and many people were arrested or searched. Those in the capital described the atmosphere as "a state under siege."

The government charged Sappe with planning to blow up the SAARC conference centre, which he had once been asked to design. In fact, three days before being taken to prison, Sappe was involved in a motorcycle accident and was still being treated for concussion at the time of his arrest.

Other journalists arrested with Sappe were charged with

Sewing up a voice



"withholding information about the sabotage plan." Human rights organisations believe the journalists may have been tortured in pre-trial detention to make them confess to the alleged crimes.

Sappe was forced to speak in his own defence at his trial because lawyers are too frightened to oppose the govern-

ment. A year after his arrest, in December 1991, he was sentenced to 11 years jail.

Ironically, the issue of Sangu about to be published when Sappe was arrested was dedicated to an investigation of prison conditions in the Maldives. At Dhoonidhoo Island prison, where Sappe is held, conditions are harsh.

Prisoners say they are handcuffed so tightly that the cuffs bite into their flesh. Sappe is held in solitary confinement in a tiny four-foot-by-seven-foot cell made of corrugated iron which heats like an oven during the day.

Prisoners are allowed only the minimum amount of water and this is served in an un-washed kerosene can, making it virtually undrinkable.

Mohamed Nashed, a journalist for Sangu, is also on trial, accused of "withholding information about the sabotage." When arrested, he was already serving six months under house arrest for writing an article for a Sri Lankan newspaper that alleged government ballot rigging in the elections.

It is generally believed the real reason for his arrest was interviews he gave to the BBC World Service and Radio Australia during the SAARC summit, in which he criticised the government's human rights record.

Despite the general repression in the Maldives at the time of Sappe's arrest, a campaign to free Sappe was orchestrated by his friends and supporters and has now spread to his friends in Britain.

"Free Sappe" posters began appearing all over Male and people wore black armbands to protest his arrest, although several were arrested as a result.

The Maldivian government argues that the retroactive implementation of the Prevention of Terrorism Act is valid because an elected government's decisions are sovereign and cannot be questioned.

— GEMINI NEWS

Mandy Garner is a researcher for international PEN, the Writers in Prison Committee, based in London.

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.

Plight of the innocent

Sir, While referring to the letters captioned 'The Police in Action' dated 23rd December, followed by 'The Police' dated 30th Dec and 'The Police' dated 31st Dec published in The Daily Star, I share the sentiments with the writers and appreciate their courage and spirit for boldly ventilating the feeling of countless hearts. Usually the innocent people suffer silently without any protest either in word or in writing due to the reason well known to all.

The writers of the letters in a straight forward manner have given the real pictures of the daily happenings. As alleged by the commonmen and press, there are allegations of the police's collaboration with the criminals causing endless anxiety and tension to the mass. We have heard such complaints from the members of the public who sometime fell victim to rude, harsh and rash behaviour of police. The policemen act like the omnipotent forgetting the limit of their right and power. They even do not hesitate to humil-

late respectable persons holding high position and status in different offices and the society without any valid reasons.

Mentionably, on 4th January, by chance I switched on the BTV and found an interview with some Police officials and others being shown. The interviewer was very sharp and asked some pragmatic questions as to the existing law and order problems. Some of his questions gave vent to the grievances expressed in the aforesaid letters. I hope and trust that those letters have received the justified attention of the Chief of Police. In the passage of the session at one point, the Police Chief opined that the genuine complains get drowned in the heap of anonymous letters complaints.

The above comment of the Police Chief presses one to contemplate the following: 1) What compels the people seek help of the high ranking Police officers? Doesn't it indicate that the general public have lost confidence in the field level Police officials and departments? 2) Why do people

resort to anonymity? Isn't it because the police administration has failed to assure their security? 3) Is it justified to ignore the anonymous letters? What is the harm in engaging a team of crime control experts to look into them? As the police often proclaim to have devoted themselves to contain crimes, some practical steps as above will tell us about their sincerity to the purpose. 4) There is wide-spread allegation that policemen fabricate false cases to harass people at the behest of unscrupulous persons for not complying with unreasonable proposals. It is believed that thousands will provide information to substantiate the allegations if adequate security is ensured from the authority concerned.

As per the reports published in the national dailies recently, a journalist and a photographer were manhandled by the police in Jessore while covering a clash between the students and the policemen. It will not be out of place to presume that police is not very happy with the press because the newspapers present reports backed by photographic proof of police misdeeds.

The whole nation is discussing corruption in police department. We have a democratic government and as such we expect some positive steps soon.

The advanced societies of the world namely America,

Europe etc. train their policemen to be worth of the dignity and responsibility of the job they are entrusted with. In those countries too, police personnel deviate from the code of conduct and moral of the service. However, they rarely indulge in corruption because, if detected, they are severely punished for such connections. The concerned authorities in those countries, are very alert to nip corruption in the bud in law enforcing agencies.

The concerned authority and the related Ministry in our country can maintain vigilance to contain corruption in law enforcing agencies. This will visibly save the nation from the haunting monster called corruption. We wish to see our Government transform into reality what they preach.

Jerome Sarkar
Protap Das Lane, Dhaka

Islamic fundamentalism

Sir, This has reference to your editorial of 30 December, 1991 'Alarm over Algeria'. My attention has been drawn to your following statement: 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...

Although the western media fondly calls those who want

the establishment of Quranic laws — "Islamic Fundamentalism"; in Islam, there is no such thing as fundamentalism. On the other hand, there is no such thing as partial Islam either. Belief in some parts of the Quran and disbelief of others is unacceptable to god. The Quran explicitly lays down the laws to be followed in a society, belief in which is binding upon every Muslim.

I have little knowledge of how you "know" Islamic fundamentalism "today". If Islamic fundamentalism means the rules of God, it will be most rewarding on your part to believe that it will provide solution to problems faced by Muslim countries all over the world.

Masood ur Rahman
Mirpur, Dhaka

Playground becomes site for buildings!

Sir, There are about 250 families residing in the multi-storied buildings situated in the so-called Baily Dump. In between the multi-flat buildings, there is an open space in front of the mosque — which is the only playground for the children of those flats.

Recently a news item was published in the newspapers stating that a 14-story building would be constructed on the vacant space for the police officers. If this is true, then

there would be no playground either for the children of the present flats or for the children of the proposed 14-story building which is sure to house at least 40/50 families.

It is not imperative that children should have a breathing space i.e. a play ground for them? How come that the authorities have completely overlooked this aspect!

We urge upon the concerned quarters to reconsider the matter and shift the proposed building elsewhere in the city.

Abdur Rashid
Baily Dump, Dhaka

Felicitations

Sir, We are very glad to see that 'The Daily Star' has successfully completed its first year. We are living in a world of competition where the theory of 'survival of the fittest' is still very much effective. The number of English language dailies are increasing in our country in spite of a limited readership. Under this situation, every English language newspaper has to 'do a hard job' to keep its standard high and up-to-date.

Meanwhile, we wish The Daily Star all success and a bright future.

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