

Bazaar of Death Booms Again in the Middle East

by Daya Kishan Thussu

In the wake of the Gulf war arms control was high on the agenda. Yet today the lucrative arms trade, the world's second biggest business after oil, is thriving again in the volatile Middle East. As Gemini News Service reports, the merchants of death are cashing in on the political susceptibilities of the regimes there and further militarising the region.

In Foreign Lands They Languish

The number of Bangladesh nationals now in foreign countries' jails has been put by Foreign Minister A S M Mustafizur Rahman at 1885. This official figure placed at the Jatiya Sangsad on Tuesday looks suspect. The actual number of jailed persons in foreign countries in all likelihood is much higher. On the list of countries having Bangladesh nationals in their jails one spectacular omission is India. Then the number of Bangladesh nationals in Japanese jails has been put only at seven and in Pakistan the figure is 280.

A series of reports carried in different dailies a few months back however indicated that even in Japan and Pakistan the number of jailed Bangladesh nationals was in the region or several thousands. And it is incomprehensible that not a single person from Bangladesh has landed in Indian jails. But the difference of a couple of thousands between the official figure and the actual figure is not going to substantially diminish or increase government responsibilities involved in the matter. Individually, though, the tragedy may be too agonising to be consoled and too devastating to be compensated.

Not all countries are embarrassed to have their nationals in foreign countries' jails, but fortunately some are. For countries like Bangladesh the issue, however delicate it may be, is no more painfully embarrassing. That people's desperation forces them to accept dubious offers, come what may, stems from the very socio-economic factors which are far from being the ideal. Even granted that the government falls short of its duties in ensuring employment for all, there has to be clear distinction between and among the offences that have landed the people from Bangladesh in jails in foreign countries.

Certainly there are people who have committed serious crimes to find their ways behind bars, then there are others who have either deceived or been deceived and still others who simply are innocent victims. So far as the criminals are concerned, the Bangladesh government cannot do much about them. In deception cases, those who have fallen victim to others' notoriety certainly deserve compassion and they should be helped out of the situation. And the innocent victims deserve all the help and cooperation possible under the circumstances.

In this context the government has a lot to do about the infamous manpower export agencies who have accounted for unmitigated tragedies of hundreds of families. Considering the pressure of unemployment in the country, the government should particularly take upon itself the task of exploring more job markets abroad. The government initiative, for instance, immediately after Kuwait had been freed, left much to be desired. In a competitive world it is not easy to wrest initiative from others who are equally, if not more, under pressure to provide jobs for their nationals. Second, the government responsibilities extend further in that it must eliminate the slightest risks of job-seekers falling victim to manpower agencies' deception.

As for the duties of the embassies of Bangladesh abroad, not all is well on the foreign employment front too. They can certainly gear up their works to integrate their diplomatic activities with exploration of job markets and bringing an end to illegal immigration of Bangladesh nationals abroad. But as long as the demand for cheap labour will be there in foreign countries and the Bangladesh nationals' requirement for foreign jobs will be so pressing, legal measures alone will not prove to be quite adequate. The best way is to create opportunities consistent with demographic and other factors.

Rouse Rabble, for a Rouble

They are all at it in the former Soviet Union nowadays. Trying, that is, to make a fast buck out of the chaotic crumbling of the once-powerful, once-communist, ex-empire. According to a report published in the press last Thursday, Moscow city authorities have recently decided to impose a fee on holding of street demonstrations. Organisers of such events — assuming that Moscow demonstrations are indeed organised affairs — are now required to pay the city administration an unspecified amount, in addition to getting the mayor's prior permission.

This move illustrates the extent to which Russian authorities now find themselves searching for sources of extra revenue. However, it is also indicative of the speed with which old bureaucrats seem to be learning the tricks of the new trade called capitalism. After all, why shouldn't they demand a price from thousands of people, many of whom may be nothing more than just rabble-rousers, for marching on roads and avenues that were built for different purposes altogether? And what about the cost to ensure security and discipline during demonstrations, as well as drafting in extra traffic policemen to untangle all the jams that inevitably build up during these marches? When extra cost is incurred, somebody has to pay for it. So why not charge the demonstrators themselves, rather than fork out the cash from the city's own funds?

Tales of problems created by street demonstrations would easily find sympathetic ears in our capital city as well. Most of our streets, particularly in the vast expanse from Motijheel upto Manik Mia Avenue, are now under occupation of organisers of street events, from major cultural outfits to insignificant political parties who probably could not muster enough votes to save their deposits in a Ward Commissioner election.

Moscow's action may well make some officials in the Dhaka City Corporation think that there may still be something in the old USSR from which we could learn. But beware! The Russian government is already facing accusations that Moscow's action is nothing more than a ploy to silence anti-government agitation which is showing signs of gathering steam. In our case, since street events have become part of the national culture, and since "development" of the city in the past decade and a half has obliterated such grand rally areas as the Paltan Maidan etc., any decision by DCC officials to emulate their bureaucratic cousins in Moscow may well meet with extreme hostility. Worse, it may, like millions of other rules and regulations, simply get ignored, making the DCC look foolish. Whether Muscovites are capable of such wonderfully independent and unregulated behaviour is not yet clear.

It is business as usual for the arms traders in the Middle East, despite calls for arms control after the Gulf war. Free marketing publicity came from the US-dominated media during the war. Now the oil-rich regimes in the region are clamouring to re-equip and expand their armed forces with the latest and most sophisticated armaments and warplanes.

Although much was made of the precision of the new high-tech weaponry, only seven per cent of the bombs dropped were "smart" ones; the other 93 per cent were responsible for the slaughter of up to 200,000 Iraqis.

Since the Gulf war, the US has announced \$18 billion of deals with the Arabs and Israelis. Many other deals are in the pipeline. At the Dubai International Air Fair in November 1991, where the high-tech stars of the war were on show, McDonnell Douglas confirmed that Saudi Arabia would buy 72 F-15 fighter bombers worth \$4 billion. The major US arms maker is also hoping to sell 26 F-15s to the United Arab Emirates.

Kuwait is keen to buy 35 FA-18s bombers and last spring Egypt signed agreements with the US for more than \$2 billion in military aid to buy 46 F-16 fighter planes. In addition, the Patriot anti-missile system has been ordered by Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Bahrain.

European defence manufacturers are increasingly concerned about the US hold on the lucrative Middle East arms market in the aftermath of the Gulf war.

However, as the US's natural ally, Britain has not done too badly. With plans to double the size of its armed forces, Saudi Arabia announced in November 1991 the purchase

of Tornado and Hawk fighter jets from British Aerospace. The United Arab Emirates has ordered Hawk 100s and is also negotiating a missile deal with London.

Since 1988 the arms trade had been declining. Defence contractors faced a financial squeeze and East-West tension evaporated and NATO countries scaled down their defence budgets. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

(SIPRI) the global market in conventional arms shrunk by 35 per cent in just one year from 1989 to 1990.

Many believe that the demoralisation of the Iraqi President — to whom the West had no qualms in selling arms — was aimed at creating a bogeyman to justify the arms trade in the post-Cold war world.

As Western countries further cut their defence budgets in the post-Soviet world, ex-

ports are likely to grow to the Middle East — an area with a potent combination of wealth, unrepresentative governments and political instability.

The arms trade cuts across ideological barriers: Communist China arms some of the most reactionary regimes in the world, including Saudi Arabia and Iran. Under Mao, China derided the West's readiness to sell weapons for profit or as a substitute for diplomacy, yet it is now helping Iran with the early stages of Tehran's nuclear programme.

It is also believed that China supplied Syria earlier last year with M-9 ballistic missiles and Saudi Arabia with nuclear-capable CSS-2 missiles.

This has prompted the US to ask Beijing to sign the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), an international forum started in 1987 after Western concerns about the spread of ballistic technology.

Finding it difficult to beat tanks in tractors, the east Europeans are now marketing their defence industries. Earlier last year, Czechoslovakia sold T-72 tanks to Syria. The deal was condemned by the US as "destabilising" the Middle East, in the very week in which Washington announced a new programme of military sales to its regional allies.

Sales to the region from the former Soviet Union have also increased. Russia is selling off cheaply military equipment from the former Soviet army's

vast stock of weapons for much needed foreign currency. In early January Iran is believed to have bought Su-24 and MiG-29 planes from Moscow. The New York Times reported in January that Syria was planning a deal with Russia worth \$2 billion, involving long-range, surface-to-air missiles.

Third World arms exporters have also tried to reap the benefits of the spending spree. North Korea has sold a modified version of the Scud missile to Syria, paid for by the \$2.5 billion given to Damascus by Saudi Arabia for showing loyalty during the Gulf war.

Since the end of the Gulf war, the West has made proposals to curb the arms race to the Middle East. France — a prime arms exporter in the Middle East — has proposed a global arms control programme.

Last June British Prime Minister John Major proposed a register of international arms deals, with buyers and suppliers required to provide information. He also called for greater "transparency" in arms transfers to check proliferation of weapons world-wide.

Many observers welcomed this with enthusiasm. Said Stephanie Koorey, of the London-based Campaign Against Arms Trade: "This unprecedented move could be a great step forward and is most welcome. It will bring some openness to the secret world of the arms trade."

However, the main arms-making countries do not

appear to be practising what they preach.

In May 1991 President George Bush said that US would stop conventional arms transfers to the region, at the same time as Defence Secretary Dick Cheney announced that Israel will get 10 extra F-15 fighters as part of a big defence package. Two months later the Pentagon announced it would sell \$365 million worth of highly sophisticated conventional weaponry to Saudi Arabia, including laser-guided bombs and air-to-air missiles.

In October 1991 the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council agreed on guidelines for arms sales to the Middle East and exchange of information aimed at regulating arms exports to the region.

Critics say that the US is using the arms proliferation issue to wipe out competitive arms producers in smaller countries. They accuse the UN Security Council permanent members — who account for over 80 per cent of the total world arms trade — of trying to establish an arms cartel as part of the new world order, dictating who will buy what and from whom.

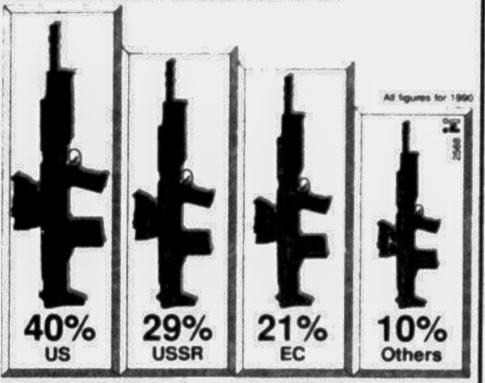
Lasting peace will elude the Middle East until the UN imposes strict international controls on the arms trade. The Middle East, an area of acute tension, is the most heavily armed region of the Third World. Since 1948 it has seen five wars between Israel and the Arab nations and two major Gulf wars.

If the merchants of death are not halted before too long the region will again be the scene of destruction.

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Top arms exporters

Third World exports only 1% but imports 55% of world's arms
Top arms importer in 1990 was Saudi Arabia



Military spending absorbs 5.5% of GNP of developing world. In some countries defence spending is more than twice that on health and education.

After a most disastrous 1991, the Philippines has hardly any other way to go but up.

The climb will be thorny, but at least the people will have a say on the choice of direction and as to who will mind the store.

The nation's attention is now riveted on the general elections scheduled May 11, this year. The polls will clean the entire elective slate, from the president of the republic to the lowest municipal councilor.

There is prevalent feeling that such a summary changing of the guard will presage better times.

With President Cory Aquino's avowed retirement at the end of her term June 30, an unprecedentedly large number of candidates — eleven of them at the last count — have announced their bid for the presidency. Among them is the irrepressible former first lady, Mrs Imelda Romualdez Marcos.

This overflow situation in the presidential derby is regarded as both good and bad. Good because the candidates are forced to dream up the most persuasive programmes to solve the country's ills; but bad because of the likelihood the ultimate winner could be elected by a minority vote with a correspondingly weak mandate to govern.

May 11 Polls Presage Better Times for the Philippines

Baldomero T. Olivera writes from Manila

In any case, with so many candidates vying for the presidency, a high level of election spending during the coming campaign is expected to stimulate the economy.

The incoming administration will be faced with a number of serious problems. Poverty still stalks the land. The economy is wobbling at near zero rate of growth.

Government staggers under mounting budgetary deficits, while no definitive formula has been developed to solve the increasing burden of foreign debts.

Unemployment is a nightmare. Thousands of jobs were slipping away with the ongoing withdrawal of the American military bases, not to mention the mounting recessionary trend in the economy and the serious dislocation caused by the eruption of Mt Pinatubo volcano last June. Infrastructure and utilities shortages remain acute. Brownouts stand to worsen before they are remedied. That is the bad news. But there is good news, too. Slowly but surely, the economy will

begin perking up in 1992, according to most experts.

There is a bumper harvest of rice this season. There are plans to export the surplus stock.

The communist insurgency and rightist rebellion are both "under control," according to the security authorities who

ingly landed only one gold medal short of winning the championship of the Southeast Asian Games hosted by Manila last November, while songstress Lea Salonga made her countrymen prouder yet when she won top honours as Broadway actress after her earlier successes on the London

promise "substantial stability" in the coming year.

With the expected stability, foreign investments will trickle in especially as industrial estates are being developed to attract investors.

And in the face of unprecedented natural disasters in 1991, the people experienced an exhilarating sense of national pride as a result of Filipino successes in athletics and the performing arts.

The Philippines surpris-

ingly landed only one gold medal short of winning the championship of the Southeast Asian Games hosted by Manila last November, while songstress Lea Salonga made her countrymen prouder yet when she won top honours as Broadway actress after her earlier successes on the London

stage. Finally, a strong feeling of nationalism was aroused when the Philippine Senate voted to remove foreign troops from the Philippine territory. The US is scheduled to clear the naval base at Subic bay within this year after being forced to vacate the airforce base at Clark Field by the eruption of Mt Pinatubo volcano last June.

That is the last vestige of colonialism shall be finally erased from Philippine territory.

Foreign exchange reserves stood at around US\$4.5 billion and the peso wound up stronger at P 26.65 from more than P 30 to the dollar in January of 1991. Interest rates were stabilised at from 20 to 25 per cent. The IMF review team, noting the successful measures against inflation and the improvement of the trade balance during the year, praised the

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.

Structural planning for Dhaka

Sir, The need for a sound and suitable urban planning and development is paramount today for Dhaka — a developing village, when considered in the perspective of a modern city compared to Asian cities, not to speak of the western ones. With burgeoning population influx into Dhaka, a greater city needs to be planned right now in broad future perspectives/outlooks comprising extended neighbouring sub-urban areas.

The zonal plans for such areas as Senpara Parbata, Badda, Khilkhet are well-known when over 32 years have elapsed after the government acquired these areas for development but of late has de-acquired at least two areas without implementing any development. Not long ago on August 30, 1990, the autocrat past government through its Gazette brought all areas under Uttara, Demra, Gulshan, and Lalbagh police stations to develop them into satellite towns. With no policy guidelines, the newly created areas that have been brought under Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) as its satellite towns are kept from building plan allocation to the utter detriment of the settlers and owners of the landed property who like to build cost-effective

houses for low-income and middle-income families. Even the much needed wide roads and avenues to meet the future over-crowding situation are not being built even now. Rather the people are haphazardly constructing houses/shelters, only to be demolished soon by RAJUK when they would rise to the occasion in no other way than what they pursue.

We have confidence that our local engineers are capable enough to build our city, i.e. urban planning and development, better than foreign engineers/planners because the local engineers/planners know better where the shoe pinches. Curiously enough, the DCC's satellite town areas that are to be brought under development fold are neither rural nor urban by consideration. The worst sufferers are the people who have purchased landed property there considering these areas to be under DCC.

In these perspectives, full privatisation of housing development and urban planning through competitions among several local based housing firms, consultants and development organisations is urgently needed for rapid and quick development of housing, road and other infrastructures. But a policy guideline and regulating laws need be formu-

lated through participation by the people's organisations and rank and file of low and middle income groups. This is of paramount importance right now. The Dhaka city, a misnomer of capital metropolis, should be planned and developed vis-a-vis projection that it is going to be the 7th largest (populous) city in the world by the turn of 2000 A. D. when 'Health for All' is supposed to be ensured to maintain also an ecological balance and environmental protection.

We urge upon the government that appropriate laws be enacted for urban planning and development with a sound policy guideline but with a competitive and qualitative action plan facilitating people's participation and welfare.

Vox populi

Schools

Sir, To perpetuate a sound mind in a sound body" is considered to be the main purpose of education. But in true practice, this purpose is merely served by the educational institutions in our country. Now education has become a commercial enterprise. The main purpose of enrolling oneself in an educational institution is to obtain a certificate with a view to become a member of the privileged group. How much knowledge a student gathers is not so important.

Like, say garment industry, school business has also become a highly profitable industry. We have only a limited number of Cadet Colleges in the country but the number of pre-cadet private schools are numerous. Schools are being established in almost every locality especially in the city of Dhaka. This is good, but what these schools are doing, imparting education or earning money?

Parents from the poor and middle sections of the society are the worst sufferers. They can afford to admit their wards neither to a private school nor even to a general school. Only parents who are financially capable of arranging private coaching for their children by the teacher(s) of those schools where they filed applications for admission, can do.

Private schools are actually creating a special class in the society. There is no control over the standard of education. In my opinion, at this stage, the government should nationalise all the private schools and colleges and bring the entire education system under its control. There should be common syllabus, tuition fees and facilities for all educational institutions of the country. For meeting up the huge expenditure, special levies may be imposed on the well-to-do sections of our society. Donor agencies may be approached for collecting extra funds for the nationalisation of our education system.

M. Zahidul Haque, Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural College, Dhaka.

Helps all the way

Sir, Bangladesh is fortunate enough to get foreign aids so much so often. The developed nations' and international donors have been helping LDC Bangladesh with cash-and-kinds in terms of development

projects and humanitarian services like Norway's assistance in health and family planning, rural development, inland water, education, and environmental sectors. A Norwegian parliamentary delegation that visited Bangladesh recently emphasized "Norway will play an active role in the economic development of Bangladesh" in addition to annual substantial bilateral assistance Bangladesh receives from her.

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Definition of minimum

Sir, PDB, while announcing Electricity Tariff, provided that domestic consumers who consume lesser units of energy will have to pay a minimum i.e. those consumers who will consume electricity less than 60 units will have to pay the minimum charge of Tk 100/-. For instance, a person consuming 50 units in a month will have to pay Tk 100/- although the total charge that would have been payable by him comes to — Unit Charge of 50 Units @ Tk 1.65 Tk 82.50, Service Charge Tk 3.00, Govt Tax per unit @ .15 Tk 7.50 = Total Tk 93.00.

In this case a domestic consumer has to pay extra Tk 6/- to cover the minimum.

But in fact a consumer consuming 50 units is actually being charged by the PDB — Unit Charge Minimum Tk 100/-. Service Charge Tk 5/-, Govt Duty Tk 7.50 = Total Tk 112.50

My point is that when minimum of Tk 100/- has been fixed which is very much a coercion in cases, since a person not consuming electricity beyond 60 Units has to pay more than what is normally due from him. Why such consumer is being charged over the minimum?

In fact the term minimum is apparently clear and over the minimum there cannot be any other charge added to burden the already burdened shoulder.

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