

'Cultural Democracy'

It was a profound issue that the Prime Minister touched upon last Friday while inaugurating the Ekushey Book Fair at the Bangla Academy. There is indeed an urgent need to establish cultural democracy in our society along with the political and economic. What is 'cultural democracy'? It means a culture where democratic values are most thoroughly integrated leading to democratic practice at every level of social life, the acid test of which is habitual tolerance of the most diverse and critical views. It would be an atmosphere in which 'hundred flowers would bloom'. In such a culture intellectuals, scientists, professionals and politicians would not be branded as belonging to this or that coterie but judged on the merit of what they are trying to say.

Cultural democracy also means creating a free and unencumbered environment to allow the most unfettered growth of culture, its inner dynamics being its sole guiding force. It is a condition in which our own culture will be enriched by the best in others and through assimilation and co-existence with other cultures, reach ever newer heights of creativity and growth. The 'melting pot'—that the US was, and continues to be, to which the European cultures at first, followed by African, Asian and Latin ones later poured their magnificent diversity—is what made the American culture as dynamic as it has been. It was only after Japan opened itself to the Western thoughts and practices during Meiji Restoration that its modern dynamism took off. Remember Peter The Great travelling incognito throughout Europe to bring back newer ideas and technology to Russia that really brought his country at par with the rest of Europe. The Islamic civilization learnt so much from the Greeks and the Romans. Later, it was what Europe learnt from the Islamic thinkers and writers that made such rich contribution in European renaissance.

The message from history is loud and clear. To grow and create a culture must be given the widest possible latitude of freedom. The State must extend all sorts of support, but never interfere and try to become its guide or the 'grand designer'. The Third World experience has been bitter in this regard. On the one hand there is an inexorable pressure from the industrialised West to emulate them. On the other, in the name of preventing it, there is the irresistible temptation on the part of many Third World countries to close their doors to everything external.

We must remember that just as there is no pure race any more, so also there is no pure culture any more. Culture needs to 'breathe' from the most diverse sources possible, otherwise it ceases to grow and create. In this regard we welcome the Prime Minister's proposal to hold an international book fair in Bangladesh every three years. We wholeheartedly support the PM's emphasis on mass literacy as a precondition to develop our culture and promote the growth of our language. However, we cannot overemphasize the danger of the State, and in its name the government, becoming too involved in interfering with the development of culture. We recall with utter disgust Ershad's 'Cultural Commission' and similar attempts to tailor make culture. Thank God, it never worked and it never will.

The Prime Minister said, the intellectuals are the 'conscience of the nation'. Give them freedom and we will have a dynamic, forward looking and creative culture that will lift us from the morass that we are in.

Reforming the UN

If the new UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali places the emphasis on raising the efficiency of his organisation, especially by streamlining the bloated bureaucracy at the top, the cost-saving, a major UN concern, will follow as a matter of course. Judging by press reports, this is precisely the strategy being followed by the chief of the global body.

In the first move, as many as 14 major positions and departments, affecting 13 of 27 under-secretaries-general, have been slashed, abolished or consolidated. These reforms have left jobs held by the rank and file of UN employees virtually untouched, which explains why the measures just announced have been well received by the UN employees, from mid-level downwards.

Having earned a measure of credibility, Dr Ghali is now in a strong position to introduce other moves, including some unpalatable ones, to bring about a qualitative lasting change in the operation of the whole organisation. This is particularly important in the light of new tasks facing the UN. While the peace-making role of the organisation will acquire an added dimension, a new department will be responsible for monitoring early signs of crisis anywhere in the world.

The decision to phase out the Geneva-based office for Development and International Economic Co-operation, a task assigned to various specialised agencies, suggests that duplication of work within the UN system will be reduced, if not completely eliminated. This should serve as a signal to other bodies in the UN system, which, operating within their own rules, often end up by creating their own empires. While showing due respect for the autonomous specialised agencies, like UNESCO, FAO, UNEP and ILO, Dr Ghali should tell their chiefs that the UN system, as a whole, cannot function effectively unless their organisations take up reforms with increased seriousness. After all, the work of these agencies touch the lives of millions of people, especially in the field of grassroots development, much more than the United Nations in New York. So far, Dr Ghali has won only a part of the battle, the bigger — much bigger — of which still faces the Egyptian diplomat. We wish him luck.

The Yunnan plateau in S. W. China, deeply scored by the parallel trenches of the Yangtze, Mekong and Salween rivers and bordering Burma, Laos and Vietnam has been of great strategic importance since at least 42 A. D., the date of the Chinese invasion of Annam (Vietnam).

Yunnan is a prosperous province with a mild climate permitting two rice crops, reserves of tin and coal and with forests in its western part which adjoins Burma. It is approachable from the South by the ancient trade route which once linked the jade mines of northern Burma, through Bhamo, to the market at Tengyueh in Yunnan and came to be known as the northern branch of the famed 'Burma Road'.

Following the Japanese invasion of 1931, Yunnan with Szechwan became the heart of Free China. New industrial centres were established in both provinces by technicians fleeing the Japanese to join the Chinese government. While Chungking, the capital of China, became the seat of the administration, Kunming, the capital of Yunnan, replaced Peking (Beijing) as the academic centre of China.

After the outbreak of World War II, the Yunnan plateau became the base for a powerful American air force and a Chinese-American army supported by road and air from northern Burma. The Burma Road was improved and used to great effect by the forces fighting under Major-General Joseph (Vinegar Joe) Stilwell against the Japanese in aid of the Kuomintang of Generalissimo Chiang Kai Shek in China.

After the end of World War II and the expulsion of Chiang Kai Shek by the Communists under Mao Zedong, the Burma Road faded into obscurity.

Conditions in northern

The Burma Road: An Interpretation

by S. Alam Rashid

For the first time in over a generation, a Burmese government is going to be permitted to use the Burma Road — albeit under Chinese protection and at China's discretion, as the major terminus of the Burma Road is Chungking. With the sale of Chinese gun-boats to the Burmese, the other end of the Burma Road would seem to be the shores of the Bay of Bengal.

Burma, a war zone for nearly ten years upon the granting of independence to Burma in 1948, proved to be beyond the administrative abilities of the authorities in Rangoon. The numerous arms scattered by various armies found their way into the hands of rebels as well as bandits and soldiers of fortune; rice paddies had gone to seed; the mines had been closed down; there was racial tension between the Burmans and the minorities, notably the Karens; there was a Shan population on both sides of the border as well as other ethnic Chinese groups; Communism inspired and encouraged by China had found fertile soil as, indeed, had the poppy.

To add to the problems of northern Burma were elements of Chiang Kai Shek's retreating Kuomintang soldiery which had served with the Chinese-American army and had remained in the jungles of Burma. This well-armed and disciplined force continued to receive covert American support in the form of weapons and money and managed, much to the chagrin of the West and the delight of the East, to organise the systematic cultivation of the poppy and establish jungle laboratories for the production of opium or heroin-base.

Despite its dissatisfaction with this new interest in agriculture on the part of its recent allies, the US did little or

nothing to discourage them, especially during the Vietnam war, perhaps partly because it was trying to rally the support of hill tribes which raised poppies for a living and as the ex-Kuomintang were seen to be a counter-weight to the total Communist domination of northern Burma.

The Chinese too, under an armed truce with this recent US ally, made sure that there was an uninterrupted flow of heroin-base to an eager Western market.

Thus the Burma Road, now used by drug traffickers and Communist guerrillas, passed effectively into the control of China.

Successive and equally helpless governments in Rangoon have had to contend with an unyielding Chinese attitude towards northern Burma and it was not until the collapse of Communism in eastern Europe and the more or less simultaneous suppression of democratic movements in both China and Burma that China was able to bring itself to a re-consideration of its policy towards Burma.

With China's new policy of arming the Ne Win regime in Rangoon, the Burma Road takes on a new importance as military convoys from China begin to travel down it. For the first time in over a generation, a Burmese government is going to be permitted to use the

Burma Road — albeit under Chinese protection and at China's discretion, as the major terminus of the Burma Road is Chungking. With the sale of Chinese gun-boats to the Burmese, the other end of the Burma Road would seem to be the shores of the Bay of Bengal.

In order to try and understand why China has decided to arm an unpopular and unstable regime in Rangoon and thereby alarm many of its friends, it is first necessary to review China's other new policy moves.

China has made a concerted effort to repair its relations with an increasingly communal India and, with India, has recognised Israel; but it has also, in a conciliatory or confusing gesture, promised to further Pakistan's nuclear research programme. Hence, while pleasing the U.S. with its recognition of Israel and its efforts in New Delhi, it has displeased the U.S. with its military assistance to Burma and its gesture to Pakistan. To reconcile U.S. opinion, China has accepted the presence of Israeli military advisers in Burma. In all this, there is a remarkable absence of consideration for the attitude of those who support neither the idea of a fundamentalist India nor a theocratic Israel.

In China itself, there appears to be a growing awareness of the contiguity of the

five predominantly Muslim republics of the erstwhile USSR to China's own Sinkiang province and the natural antipathy of Muslim populations to atheistic Communism. Today, China is reminded of the map of the empire of the Tang dynasty in 750 A.D. when the outermost frontiers of Islam were marked by the western border of China. The fact of a Muslim population in Yunnan province, at the head of the Burma Road, is hardly reassuring to an unpopular regime.

It would now appear that China's new interest in Burma is a purely military one and Burma is to play a military role in China's overall policy. The question is, what is this role?

Is Burma's new military prowess going to be directed against its troublesome northern states that adjoin China and have always enjoyed China's strategic support? Does Burma feel suddenly threatened by its neighbours Thailand, Kampuchea, India and Bangladesh? In view of China's overtures to India, it is unlikely that Burma would go anywhere near its 1000-mile border with India; it is also absurd. If Thailand and/or Kampuchea were to be confronted with Chinese arms, deep thought would have to be given to Washington's reaction. Or is Burma going to use Chinese arms in suppressing internal dissent which is en-

couraged by the whole world except China? If this is the purpose, then Burma could not have made a wiser choice of military advisers than Israel which has developed great expertise in the management of unarmed civilian populations.

In view of Burma's demonstration of military power against the Rohingya Muslims in southern Burma and its continuing pressure on the Bangladesh border, it would appear that Burma is turning its face to the North. This would necessitate the securing of its rear or the South inhabited by a dissident Muslim population. Burma's expulsion of the Rohingyas into Bangladesh is a preliminary to other moves that will ultimately secure and seal the Burma Road.

This line of thought becomes tenable if Burma is seen as a grateful and reliable Chinese ally willing to deny sanctuary or safe passage to potential Muslim dissidents trying to flee Yunnan along the Burma Road. Conversely, the Burma Road could be seen as a long finger pointing at China's soft underbelly.

In this kind of situation, and despite any understandings between Bangladesh and Thailand, the price that China would have to pay in terms of strained relations with relatively unimportant nations would be adequately compensated by greater internal security in a highly vulnerable area. China's current attitude to the rest of the Islamic world is summed up in its eloquent policy towards Israel.

But for Burma and perhaps, to an equal extent for China, it is really a question of whether either regime will be given enough time by its own people to use the Burma Road for the suppression of Muslim minorities with the help of Israel.

All-White Parliament Begins to Lose its Power

John Perlman writes from Johannesburg

Five working groups involving 19 political parties are now getting down to work to forge a new South Africa. Everyone will come together in March for another plenary session of the Convention that met for the first time in December. Meantime, the powers of the all-white parliament, a relic of apartheid, are shrivelling.

ABC of CODESA			
	FUTURE OF HOMELANDS	INTERIM GOVERNMENT	CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY
ANC	Immediate reincorporation of homelands. Unitary state. Strong central government	Interim government for transition	Elected constituent assembly to agree new constitution, then general election to elect parliament and new government
Democratic Party	Unequivocally opposed to continued existence of homelands. Wants federal constitution with strong powers for regions	Transitional government. Council of leaders representing major parties. State president continues all executive functions	Constitutional conference elected on a one-person-one-vote basis. Majority party in constitutional conference and in parliament have veto powers
Inkatha	Reunited state. Strong state powers, each represented in Senate. State premiers and governors. Recognition of traditional rulers	Present government to rule till constitution negotiated. No interim government	Constitution to be negotiated by CODESA and referendum held
SA government National Party	Policy unstated, but privately say full incorporation accepted. Strong federal powers for nine regions, each under an executive committee equally represented in Senate	Transitional authority must have lifespan up to 15 years. Government to rule until elections on new constitution. But cabinet could be expanded now	No constituent assembly. Referendum on constitution with separate counting of votes of each population group. Constitution must be accepted by white electorate

referendum — and it was on this that his opponents pounced. He said the votes of each race group would be tallied separately, a principle vigorously opposed by most participants at the first meeting of CODESA, a two-day gathering of 19 parties and organisations last December which laid in place the first planks for a negotiating forum.

It is CODESA, and not in Parliament, that De Klerk and his party must continue selling their constitutional vision. At the close of CODESA a draft agreement signed by all but two participants said Convention decisions would be binding on all signatories.

The NP insist publicly that

this has not superseded the authority of Parliament. But in effect CODESA will increasingly become the launching point of major legislative changes, even if at times only by default.

Many things the Nationalists in days gone by would simply have passed laws to effect, are now being left in abeyance as CODESA gathers steam. For example, the attempt to introduce Value Added Tax last year led to such a major political upheaval that the government will not go solo on a major step like that again.

A few days before De Klerk opened Parliament, delegates returned to the World Trade Centre in Johannesburg for the

first meetings of working groups set up by CODESA last year.

The five groups comprise two delegates each plus an adviser from each of the 19 organisations represented in CODESA. They have to hammer out proposals for a new political order, which will then be thrashed out again at a second CODESA plenary session in March.

That event will doubtless see more of the furious debate that characterised the first CODESA gathering. But much of the major horse-trading will be taking place in the groups.

The group jobs are apportioned as follows:

Group 1 — Creating a citi-

mate for free political participation; the role of the international community.

Group 2 — Constitutional principles and a constitution making body/process.

Group 3 — Transitional arrangements for government in the period leading to a new Constitution.

Group 4 — The future of the 'independent homelands' — Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Ciskei and Venda.

Group 5 — Time-frames mechanisms for implementing, decisions of CODESA. The programmes of many of the key parties before the first CODESA meeting suggested there would be widely divergent positions on many issues.

The ruling National Party for instance, was unequivocally opposed to the idea of an interim government or any other form of transitional authority that would interfere with the state's sovereignty.

It said the present government should continue to govern until the first elections based on a new Constitution were held.

That clashed squarely with the view held by the African National Congress (ANC) and others that CODESA should set up an elected constituent assembly which would then negotiate the Constitution.

These working groups will get to work in earnest in the coming month, and the results of their talks and the public positions the parties take up around them will be of far more significance than who says what in parliament.

That hard fact was, in effect, acknowledged by De Klerk, in the vagueness of his opening address to the House.

The power struggle in South Africa politics is not simply being played out in these rarefied realms. Down on the ground, the average citizen, understandably perplexed

by the many and frequently changing constitutional models, is still living the transition at its rather rougher edge.

Recently the incidence of random attacks on black people, particularly on commuter trains, has increased again, just as newspapers have once again exposed hard evidence of security force involvement in 'Third force' violence.

A spate of bomb attacks, mostly on newly integrated schools and union offices, has clearly signalled that the far right intends reacting to every step CODESA takes with a violent warning. Over on the left, the armed wing of the Pan African Congress (PAC) has claimed responsibility for the shooting of policemen, thereby drawing criticism even from the ANC and others.

Both the right wing Conservative Party and the PAC refused to take part in CODESA. And even the recent inclusion of a fringe right wing group, the Africaner Volks Beweging, cannot change the impression that CODESA is principally held together by the willingness of the government and the ANC to drive it forward.

That does not mean, though, that the far left and right are simply able to cast stones at the talks. The right in particular has always been fractious, and if there is growing evidence that the white population believes CODESA should be given a try, telling splits may emerge which could lead to a greater rightwing involvement in talks.

Both De Klerk and Mandela, and the parties they represent, then, depend heavily on negotiations proceeding, if not amicably then at least with a degree of smoothness.

Both major players know that they are open to criticisms from the top extremes that could cut into their support bases. And that common problem will weigh on the participants in CODESA just as heavily as their desire to win the day for their particular point of view.

— GEMINI NEWS

JOHN PERLMAN is on the staff of the Weekly Mail of Johannesburg.

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.

Gratitude to BTV

Sir, I convey my heartfelt thanks and gratitude to BTV for its magnificent approach to telecast the forthcoming World Cup Cricket Championships. I think this will fulfill the long-felt desire of the cricket fans of the country. Hats off to BTV.

A K M Nurul Absar
Moghbar, Dhaka.

BMDC

Sir, Established in 1962 under the direct sponsorship of ILO and UNDP the

Bangladesh Management Centre situated at Sobhanbag is presently at its total shambles. Despite numerous reports appearing in Bangla and English dailies the concerned authorities have failed to take any action and mend the follies. It is now going through a major 'break and build' drama. The whole building is being torn apart and re-cast which will cost no less than ten lakh taka. There are reports of undue promotion and that because of the odd situation prevailing at the Centre several officers have resigned while others are contemplating to leave.

It is needless to say that the third and fourth class employees are most unfortunate. For there have been no promotions for them nor there is going to be any in the near future. Only recently a high official was manhandled by the agitating third and fourth class employees. Misuse of fund, holding of irregular classes, absentee officers are alleged to be regular features of BMDC. Will no one care to solve the situation and rescue the Centre from going astray?

Zamal Haider
Dhaka.

Degree exams

Sir, I feel greatly the need for the government to make just and equitable solution to the problems placed by the non-government teachers. But I feel that the closing down of degree examinations is an ex-

treme and unethical measure of using students as scapegoats in order to gain our own objectives. Therefore, I request the non-government teachers of the country to free their conscience by holding the ensuing degree examinations scheduled to begin on February 10.

Terence Penhetro
Notre Dame College, Dhaka.

Road needs repair

Sir, On the Mottijheel Fourth Lane by the front of Uttara Bank Ltd. head office leading towards Arambagh, there is a heavy breach on the eastern side of Troyoka Building (92, Mottijheel) and western side of Azad Sporting Club causing great hindrance to the movement of traffic. The Dhaka Municipal Corporation was reminded over telephone

for several times but as ill luck would have it no steps appear to have been taken to repair the broken portion. Although for the last four to five months the road is in a bad state, none from the Municipal Corporation took the trouble of visiting the spot or taking necessary steps to remove the difficulty.

Since we have failed to break the slumber of the Corporation by approach, we find no other alternative than to ventilate the grievance through the columns of your esteemed paper.

Sadequr Rahman
Arambagh, Dhaka.

Nuclear scientists

Sir, It is understood that the United States is accepting former USSR's nuclear scientists, physicists to settle in that country and work there.

The US is doing so because certain countries including Libya are reported to have been offering job to these scientists with high salaries to work in their nuclear stations. The US is afraid in the assumption that these scientists if settled in other countries might help them in creating nuclear weapons which will create a new threat to the global peace.

I do greatly appreciate the United States' concern for protecting the world against nuclear war. But who would take care against the US nuclear proliferation? Would the United States destroy its own nuclear war-heads for the cause of peace and to keep the world free of any nuclear threat?

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