

Serious Negotiations Necessary

If you do not accept our demand then we will not allow the day to day functioning of society is what the transport owners appear to be trying to prove. Holding the nation at ransom, the transport owners have thought it fit to stop all forms of transportation including those that supply essentials of daily life. In our view there are two distinct issues that need to be addressed here. One is the set of demands of the transport owners and the other is the method they are using to realise them. To deal with the latter issue first, we do not think that being a part of such a vital sector as communication, the transport owners should use their considerable strength to strangle the nation to get what they want. The fact that the supporters of the strike — who may have as well be the hired goons of the owners — attacked the BRTC buses or other forms of public transport not coming under the purview of the strike call, clearly shows that strike initiators were not satisfied by merely taking their own vehicles off the road but wanted to stifle all possible means of transport. By their act the owners have exhibited their total disregard for the convenience of the public. It was quite possible that the strike could have been conducted in phases, or on selected routes at first, gradually expanding to cover the whole country. The way it was done was aimed at causing maximum inconvenience to the public which would itself work as a pressure on the government to capitulate to their demands.

We express our reservation in the strongest of terms at the strong-arm tactics used by the transport owners to realise their demands and condemn the utter indifference that they have shown regarding public welfare.

The second issue that needs to be addressed is the substance of the demands. As the talks now stand, price of fuel seems to be the critical issue on which the fate of the negotiations hang. The owners demand that fuel price should come down to the pre-Gulf war level of Tk 6.90 instead of the present Tk 14. This rise was attributed to the international oil price hike caused by the war. It is now understood that the government has agreed in principle to reduce fuel price not immediately but from the next June. The transport owners want it from now, with the level of reduction to be fixed at the present import cost.

The government is at fault for not having foreseen the coming crisis and negotiating a solution to it much earlier. The demands of the transport owners were well-known and it has been some months that they were made public. On the other hand if the government wanted to play tough then it should have made contingency arrangements so that the strike would not disrupt civic life to the extent that it has been able to.

The present situation — with rising prices of essentials and gradual running out of fuel stock — calls for serious negotiations between the government and the transport owners. We feel that there is some merit in the demand for a reduction in the fuel price. However, the transport owners will have to remember that it is well-nigh impossible for the government to negotiate away a possible source of revenue in the middle of a budgetary year. The Home Minister's reported assurance that fuel price will be reduced from June next should be accepted by them and on the basis of a serious commitment by the government, the transport owners should withdraw their strike without further damaging the economy and making the public suffer. They have successfully made their point and we have all been made aware of their capacity to create havoc. They will however have to learn to see a bigger national picture and consider carefully the implication of their action upon the whole economy and the general public.

Sri Lanka Faces Further Tragedies

The long-drawn bloody conflict — now in its eighth year — between the Tamil guerrilla groups and the Lankan troops threatens to develop into another round of bitter engagement. Like the previous offensive this time also the government troops are expected to be on the offensive and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam on the defensive. Even then the government troops are hardly expected to muster enough firepower to bring the Tigers to their knees. One certainty is that more blood-letting and attendant tragedies will follow on both sides.

That its much-vaunted military offensive last time ended in failure should be a guide to what the Sri Lankan government really can or cannot achieve. Force at least in this place is not going to be the 'proper means' to settle the conflict. Last time the Tigers sustained tremendous loss, this time it may be still higher but the fact remains that the rebel Tamils can still take in enough of the military might of the government forces. Repeated assaults may indeed weaken the Tigers but guerrilla warfare is not won by weapons alone.

No country can opt for force in settling issues with its own citizens. Sri Lanka — reputed for peace and cultural harmony — least of all. But that precisely has been the hard choice for the feuding parties for quite a long time now. Reports give, more often than not, the number of casualties hardly focusing the attendant evils and tragedies that have left the country in tatters. Once a picturesque quiet place, the island-state has consistently gone down the ladder.

The gravity of the situation can somewhat be realised by the fact that no less than 350,000 civilian people have been displaced as a result of the civil war between the Tigers and the government forces. Sheltered in 257 refugee camps, 62 per cent of infants and 73 per cent of their preschool children are now suffering from malnutrition. Lack of food and medicine has even retarded the growth and mental capabilities of children.

Obviously, Sri Lanka is heading towards a worst kind of tragedy it can under no circumstances invite. Even if its short-term objectives were attained, Sri Lanka could not afford political move that has the potential to cripple its civilians permanently. Therefore the Sri Lankan government should be reflective enough before it goes for another offensive. We, however, feel that there are still avenues to explore for coming to a negotiated settlement. Both sides should be ready for some concessions and only then the warring parties can avoid further tragedies. Let us sincerely hope that the government side makes the first move to convince the Tamil rebels of its sincerity and seriousness about bringing the conflict to an end.

Burma and Bangladesh : Dress and Distress

WINTER is virtually over. The proverbially short season often disappoints by its shortness, its late arrival and early departure and also by its not being cold enough. The disappointment, of course, is a feeling of those who have winter clothes in the wardrobe and whose full panoply of winter suits and silks needs to be brought out to reveal the wearer at his dressed-up best. He and his likes constitute a tiny minority of the population. For the majority, though they too must be enjoying the gifts and pleasures of the season, there cannot be any regret for a lost opportunity for showing off their winter apparels, hidden away for most part of the year.

This time, the luckier ones had nothing to complain. The season gave them time and scope to show what they have for winter clothing — not simply the traditional shawls though shawls too, especially the proper Kashmiri ones, have their turn. On some social evenings, a shawl is considered a more proper thing to wear than anything western. Cultural occasions in particular will demand that at least individuals who are, or who consider themselves as being, in the public eye, will be dressed in kurta-pajama with a shawl thrown over the shoulder. This is done in deference to our oriental traditions. It gives you a distinction in a company of people with their humdrum jackets on. It also shows that we have remained undecided on some sartorial questions.

A couple of generations back, the formal dress for a Muslim gentleman was pajama and a flowing sherwani. About the head-dress, they had a choice between a cap and a tasseled red Fez, the latter being more popular. Our lead-

ers mostly appeared in this dress though members of the higher bureaucracy donned their western suits. Jinnah, as soon as he emerged as the undisputed leader of the Muslim League, thought it proper to discard, at least in public appearances, the western suit and to adopt the Muslim dress, complete with a cap that has since been followed by his name. I do not remember Suhrawardy with a sherwani on, nor Abul Hashim, though for both A. K. Fazlul Haq and Khwaja Nazimuddin, the sherwani and the cap were indispensable items of a formal dress. The towering Sher-e-Bangla preferred a loose pajama, and the short and rotund Khwaja felt happy with a tight churidar on.

Things are quite different today. Sherwani and the rest of it have become anachronisms. At the same time the certainty of those days on the question of a formal dress acceptable to all and sundry has gone without yielding place to another certainty. Most south Asian countries have found an answer to the question of a national dress, the only exception being Bangladesh. May be we are passing through a period of trials and experiments and we are in no hurry to decide.

During periods of undisputed army rule, we have had experience of some kind of 'proper dress' being imposed through decrees and officials being made to adhere to them. But the rigours of such rules have never lasted long and chappals have reappeared in place of shoes. A formal dress

is usually a pattern set by the court and in the absence of a royal court to dictate terms of civility, we have gone merrily and fancy-free in choosing our dress. Whether I approve of this freedom, is a different matter. I would not relish an unworkable, an impractical and a highly personal choice being thrust upon us but at the same time I would like to see a sense of decorum prevailing. In matters of dress, not only in our law courts but also in our offices and our class rooms.

Some tropical countries — the Philippines, Indonesia and

the world is going to take it. The choice of Aung San Suu Kyi, their civil rights leader, for Nobel Peace prize seems to have thrown Burmese leadership off-gear. All the known steps that army rulers usually take in their attempt to gag democratic urge of a people, the Burmese junta have taken: banning of political parties, arrests, gagging of the press and raising an iron curtain along the borders, blocking the flow of information from and into the country. The whole of Myanmar must be a vast prison for its people. This is a not-

find words adequate enough to express our bewilderment over what looks like a deliberate mystification of the Rohingya issue.

Myanmar, mainly through its politics of shutting itself up against the world, not excluding Bangladesh, has itself prepared the ground for mystification. The thickest of political fog envelops the country. When the election took place, and Suu Kyi's party came out with a thumping victory, we thought the fog would be lifted and we would have the chance to see the face of our neighbours. But no, that was not to be. The rulers refused to step down and to hand over power to people's representatives. This was almost an exact repetition of what happened in Pakistan after the October, 1970 elections, giving Awami League a clear majority for the whole country. The refusal of General Yahya Khan to accept the verdict of the electorate led to the disintegration of the country itself. In the West they took it as a tragedy. In the East we took it as freedom from bondage. Our tragedy was that we had to buy it at a heavy price.

In Burma the end of colonial rule came about the same time as it did in India. In the days of colonial rule, the country formed, for many years, the easternmost province of British India. It must be said in fairness to British imperialism that though it did much damage to our economy and though it sapped our vitality as national entities, it at the same time made good neighbourliness possible among people

ethnically and linguistically different from each other. Many East Bengal families went out members to Burma who earned a living there. Many spent a whole working life in Burma, quite a few settled there, and it was not unusual for many to find a wife in that hospitable country. The widely virtues of Burmese women were legendary in Bengal. The growing hostility to foreigners in Burma is a later story and one suspects that the feeling was fanned by some with a clear political motive. Our colonial rulers are often blamed for fanning communalism in India but nobody will accuse the British for post-liberation developments in today's Myanmar. Not to speak of good neighbourliness, our closest neighbours seem to have made it a point not to see our face at all. And when I say neighbours, I mean not the people but their overlords, the military rulers.

It is a pity, it is a tragedy that our two peoples have been kept artificially apart. The present suicidal politics of Myanmar is responsible for this. Democracy, once it regains its foothold in that long-suffering country, will surely pull down the wall. Nothing is impossible after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. When that happens, we may not adopt their sarong as a part of our national dress, though it is a household thing in our country. We call it lungi, elsewhere, including Sri Lanka, they call it sarong. It already serves as a bridge between our two peoples. Let the suffering of Rohingya refugees arouse world opinion, and appeal to world's conscience in favour of a Myanmar that can shake off its stranglehold of oppression and that can again be its hospitable self.

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

Sri Lanka to name a few of them — have found an answer to the problem of a formal dress. We should be able to find one for us.

I forgot to mention Burma, currently Myanmar, the source of our present worries. With their sarong and the scarf round their head, the Myanmarians too, have something distinctive to wear on formal occasions. One may not be tempted to emulate them, though the sarong has a complete sway in our society, but our neighbours certainly have resolved one issue, to their satisfaction. But other, and more important issues, they have failed to resolve. The democratic urge of their people, the rulers have suppressed quite blindly, without realising the consequences, and without appreciating how the rest of

too-unfamiliar scene for us. But what we fail to understand is their fury turned against the Rohingya population who are a part of the nation. We could have remained indifferent to whatever was happening within Myanmar, had it been a purely internal matter with them. But it is not. And every day they are throwing out hundreds of Rohingya families who are seeking shelter in neighbouring Bangladesh. The number of refugees are reaching staggering proportions, maybe have already done so, though exact figures are not available. Apart from the humanitarian aspect of this situation, the strain on our economy must be unbearable. Our response to the unexpected development along our common border with Myanmar has been too shy, too much lacking in positive content. One fails to

Bells Ring and Salvador Begins the Great Rebuilding

Edward Orlebar writes from San Jose

The end of the Cold War has given new impetus to resolving another Third World regional conflict. El Salvador's 12-year-old civil war that claimed 75,000 lives and led to the exodus of a million people seems over. Agreement has been reached between the government and the rebel FMNL and the task of reconstruction and rehabilitation has begun. More than the ceremonial signing of agreements, reports Gemini News Service, is required.

El Salvador



1821	Central America declares independence from Spain
1838-9	Central American Federal Republic dissolved into independent countries
1932	30,000 killed after failed popular uprising. Sets tone for 40 years of military rule
1980	Archbishop of San Salvador assassinated. Leftist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front formed. Civil war follows
1990	FMNL and government agree to UN mediation
1992	Jan 1 Framework peace agreement signed in New York Jan 16 Final agreement signed in Mexico City

to be disbanded and replaced by a National Civilian Police to include former members of the FMNL and demobilised members of the military.

The security forces will be cut in half over two years from their current 55,000, and human rights violators will be

purged. In London the FMLN's representative Victor Anaya called the agreement "a victory for the Salvadorean people" because the accord set about not merely establishing peace but modifying society to make it less unjust.

Anaya pointed out that groups of wealthy Salvadorean civilians, members of the armed forces, and the US government opposed the agreement, but that they had become politically isolated.

He highlighted the importance of the role for the UN force overseeing implementation of the complex agreement and of the three-man truth commission set up to investigate cases of human rights abuses.

The commission in made up of the former president of Colombia, Belisario Betancur, former Venezuelan foreign minister, Reynaldo Figueredo, and the US jurist and former president of the Inter-American Human Rights Court, Thomas Buergenthal.

Its brief includes the investigation of cases such as the killing of Archbishop Oscar Romero, allegedly by members of the security forces in March 1980, and the murder of six Jesuit priests in November 1989 by members of the elite US-trained Atlacatl battalion, during a massive FMLN offensive.

A colonel and a lieutenant were recently convicted of carrying out that atrocity. But a report by a US Congress delegation led by Senator Joseph Moakley concluded that senior members of the security forces, including the current minister and vice minister of defence, helped plan it.

In a recent interview Buergenthal, a survivor of Auschwitz, spoke of the impor-

ance of forgiveness but within a context of justice. Balancing such an equation will prove a treacherous task.

A spokesperson for the Salvadorean Embassy in London was upbeat about the future. Said Carolina Calderon: "Because of the affects of the war the desire for peace is much stronger than a few years ago."

But if the agreement is to succeed, an attitude of reconciliation is essential, she said. She expects there will be general amnesty for most of the belligerents.

The right-wing President Cristiani, a US-educated businessman and a member of the coffee-growing elite, had recognised that the war against Latin America's most sophisticated guerrilla organisation could not be won. He realised the economic necessity of ending what had become a stalemate.

In addition, he no longer had the unmitigated support of the US. The peace agreement was made possible by a shift in the US position from the rabid anti-communism of the Reagan years to indifference laced with impatience under George Bush, particularly since the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in neighbouring Nicaragua.

Backing of the El Salvadorean military had been increasingly difficult to justify with US public opinion, particularly after the Jesuit massacre and the publicity it engendered.

Reaction to the agreement in El Salvador has been mixed. Church bells pealed, people danced in the streets and guerrillas fired into the air to celebrate. However, some extreme right-wing factions and the more recalcitrant members of the governing National Republican Alliance party (ARENA) have been less enthusiastic.

An editorial in the right-wing Diario de Hoy newspaper warned of "the extremely serious threat provided by incorporating terrorists into political life, as land owners with catches of arms and an international support network."

In mid-January three bodies were found on a favoured death squad dump on the outskirts of the capital, San Salvador.

For their part, the FMLN are far from reaching the socialist utopia they once dreamed of. The demise of communism in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union has affected FMLN philosophy. Commander Joaquin Villalobos said as much in an interview last year.

The electoral defeat of the Sandinistas was a strategic blow, and the increasing isolation and impoverishment of Cuba, often a sugar daddy to the FMLN, has also been a factor in its developing pragmatism.

The FMLN is expected to announce its formation as a legal political party with the intention of participating in the general elections of 1994.

The former guerrillas are likely to form an electoral alliance with the centre left Democratic Convergence and possibly the right of centre Christian Democrats who governed for much of the Eighties.

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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.

BTV Drama serials

Sir, Bangladesh Television deserves kudos for telecasting quite a few extraordinary good drama serials. Special credit goes to Humayun Ahmed's spectacular 'Ayomoy', not to mention 'Aai Sab Din-Ratri' and 'Bobubrihi'. Some of the plays on the war of liberation are touching and a true reflection of the hopes and aspirations, fear and turmoil amidst which the Bengali people passed their days in seventytone.

In these plays we get to see the true portrayal of dedication of the many unknown valiant sons of the land who have sacrificed their lives for the country. Plays such as these have a universal appeal because the language of the heart is same for all men and women irrespective of colour and

caste. It has been observed that drama serials of Pakistan Television and Doordarsan available in video cassettes are highly popular with the viewers of the subcontinent and those living abroad.

Should there be an effort on the part of BTV to have our plays dubbed in either Urdu or Hindi, they would undoubtedly find a wider market. This could even be a commercial venture for any enterprising party.

Bangladesh TV has shown sagacity in telecasting foreign serials like 'Oshin' and 'Samsul Women' and their appeal lies with the cultural and social affinity they have with our own. They are popular because their norms and values are same as ours despite the fact that they are affluent and we are poor. BTV should be

well advised to have our plays dubbed in English or have English subtitles and exchange the plays with countries of this part of the world.

Bangladesh suffers from an identity crisis. Drama is a highly effective media for disseminating the real picture of a society. Let our TV dramas herald this truth that although we may be economically lagging behind but we aren't intellectually so.

Zaidul Haq
DOHS, Dhaka.

Road needs repair

Sir, On Road No 2 of Section 6, Block A, Mirpur, there has developed a breach almost covering three-fourth of the road-space leaving a very narrow space for movement of traffic. It seems there is none to look into the matter. The breach is therefore about six months and it is gradually widening.

The local Municipal authorities were approached, but no one has taken any care to look into the matter. We would like to draw the attention of the Dhaka City Corporation th-

ough the columns of your esteemed paper so that the difficulties may be redressed at the earliest.

Muhammad Hussain
Mirpur, Dhaka

UNAB

Sir, To mark the 45th founding anniversary of the UNESCO, the United Nations Association of Bangladesh (UNAB) recently organised a symposium at the UNIC auditorium. The speakers in the symposium expressed the hope that UNESCO, despite limitations, would continue its laudable role in invigorating the essence of world peace.

Former Foreign Minister and National Professor M Shamsul Haq who attended as the chief guest and main speaker stressed that all the nations should uphold and practice the philosophy of democracy both nationally and internationally. It is often seen that certain countries which believe in the democratic principles and maintain democracy inside their own territories do not appreciate the democratic rights of other nations, e.g. democratic rights of the Pales-

tinians to live in their own homeland.

The speakers noted with dissatisfaction USA's stand in respect of the UNESCO. They expressed their hopes that the USA, UK, and Singapore will soon re-join the UNESCO for the sake of promoting peace and international understanding. In his speech, Mr. Syed Ahmed Hossain informed that the National Commission for UNESCO of the United States has already adopted a resolution suggesting the government in favour of re-entry into the UNESCO.

While fully endorsing the observations made in the symposium, I would like to draw the attention of the UNAB officials to the following points: 1) In these seminars/symposia, opportunities should be given to the general participants to take part in the discussion. The definition or procedure for holding seminar/symposium provides such opportunity to the audiences within the functional set-up. I have noticed that some audience wanted to express their opinions but the compare regretted. 2) After free exchange of views, a resolution

should be unanimously adopted and copies of this resolution be sent to the UN headquarters and other UN associations of the world. 3) Proper timing should be maintained for each segment of the activities, such as, time for presentation of the main paper, discussions etc. Time-table should strictly be followed. 4) Synopsis of the main lecture should be supplied to the general participants. 5) Since UNESCO is an international organization, English language should be used in all deliberations and discussions. 6) Organizers should refrain from passing person-to-person irrelevant comments, remarks etc. A seminar or symposium should always be considered as a formal session.

The main task of UNAB, as I feel is not just to publicize what they are doing or will be doing in the future but to work practically in realising its objective towards scientific, educational and cultural development of this country as well as providing models to others.

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