

An Outrageous Action

Reports coming from Chittagong University are distressing — at least they have been so for the last one year. The latest of such distressing news concerns the Islami Chhatra Shibir's outrageous action on the 21st February involving the observance of the day. A function organised on the day, it seems, was more to deprecate than to mark the day in a manner the occasion calls for. Reports have it, in brief, that the Shibir kept to their vow not to allow the observance of the Amar Ekushey on the University campus. Instead, a farcical function guarded by several scores of armed Shibir activists was attended by a few teachers with allegiance for the Jamaat-e-Islami. To add insult to injury, when the Chittagong University Central Students Union (CUCSU) A G S defying the Shibir threat took the rostrum to deliver a speech, he was simply dragged down and physically assaulted. Then they staged drama satirizing those two great occasions besides voicing indecent slogans.

Chittagong University, known by this time more as a bastion of the Shibir than an educational institution, has been a witness to many such anti-Bangladesh and anti-Liberation activities, including the hoisting of a Pakistani flag. The reality that Bangladesh has come to stay is irreconcilable for the Shibir. And their perpetual opposition to everything Bangalee appears to be beyond redemption. The making of the country was made possible because the people here sought to establish their distinctive identity through language, culture and economic emancipation. It is precisely for this reason that the Language Movement of 1952, the Mass Movement of 1969 and the Liberation War of 1971 have a most sacred place in the nation's collective consciousness.

But there are forces who treat all these occasions contemptuously and are still busy conspiring against the country's independence. Most surprisingly, though, these anti-Bangladesh elements have not been challenged very effectively either by the administration or by the society at large. The price already paid in the process has been heavy. The sad part of all this is that the issues have been made to give the impression of being contentious and even divisive. Today the anti-Liberation forces dare challenge the very basis of our nationhood.

Quite consistent with the flexing of muscle by the anti-Liberation forces, the Jamaat has at last gone for a political coup by electing a Pakistani national their party chief. This is as much the pressing home of their political advantage as testing the people's patience regarding the anti-rakazak sentiment. The reaction has been sharp and strong and there is no way of taking the challenge lightly.

But then we must admit that something somewhere has gone terribly wrong. The adversaries are sure to take advantage of our lapses and weaknesses which we have demonstrated profusely. To be fair, we too are partly responsible for the rise of the forces that opposed our Liberation War. The ethos and values that went into the making of a nation have in the meantime undergone re-examination — not necessarily for the good. Thus the divisions among the pro-Liberation forces have offered a unique opportunity for the anti-Liberation and defeated forces of 1971 to further their causes. This they are relentlessly pursuing and by now they have become organised enough to undermine all that we hold so dear.

No longer can we afford to allow them to undermine our sacred institutions and spirit and values of the Liberation War. The fact that they are yet to accept the reality of Bangladesh is amply demonstrated. They surely stand blameable for unpatriotic behaviour and there should also be ways to deal with them. The question is: are we ready to take up the challenge?

Making a Virtue of Disadvantages

Planning Minister Zahiruddin Khan on Sunday pontificated on the importance of 'upholding our national culture, life and heritage through arts and paintings.' A fitter occasion could hardly be found for he was inaugurating a paintings show. And a fitter inaugurator could hardly be found for Mr Khan was a compulsive dabbler of paints for long and one hopes he has kept to it in spite of his politics. Remember Paderewski, or a closer reminder Diego Rivera or closer still Chittaprasad? Even if an irresistible reference to Guernica is somehow desisted, it cannot be glossed over that the minister was in effect inviting in or encouraging the artists of the very many kinds to be not only true to their heritage and the current life around — which together cannot but mean politics, — but also to somehow uphold it.

So far so good — although most of the politicians as well as artists may not like the idea. The creators and connoisseurs of non-figurative paintings in the Kaudiaskyan or Mondrianesque line wouldn't simply know how to do that. The Indian painters, of course, have long been trying to develop a kind of Indianness — starting from the pioneering and very important but misdirected works and preachings of Abanindranath. In our own context the glorious tradition of our Arts Institute has unflinchingly been on the side of a politically strong secular and socialism-oriented patriotism. And as a sequel to that our painters had, by and large, been on the side of, what is popular parlance called, the progressive politics. But look at their paintings — and try going into them in search of heritage and culture and life etc — you will only be befuddled.

Likewise, how will an artist of high music in the raga traditions of dhruwad, kheyal or thumri, reflect life and, well, the present perceptions of our culture and heritage? The situation has first of been muddled by a confusion about the function and use and the significance of art. It has later been doubly confounded by our present misperceptions of culture and heritage.

We would, however, like to join issue with minister Khan over a small but significant matter. For God's sake, let the artist work his way to freedom. Pray do not counsel him to take advantage of anything — even if that be manna direct from heaven, like democracy. It is their job to turn world's all disadvantages into everlasting advantages — in terms not only of art but of humanity as a whole.

And Now—the World's First Summit for First Ladies

by Andrew Lycett

The wives of up to 70 international heads of state are to meet in Geneva (Feb 26-27) to discuss the changing role of rural women. Some onlookers consider the First Ladies Summit little more than an ineffectual public relations exercise for the women. Others say it will help in a small way the fight for emancipation. Gemini News Service reports that whatever the outcome, the intention to help is genuine.

MOST wives of heads of state are reserved figures, rarely given to independent political pronouncements. Do not think, though, that these First Ladies are shielded from reality as they travel around their countries or journey overseas on state visits. Some issues affect them strongly.

They have now encouraged a small UN agency, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), to organise a conference on a topic of particular interest to them: the role of women as food producers in the developing world.

About 50 First Ladies from around the world have signed up for a Summit on the Economic Advancement of Rural Women in Geneva. Up to 70 are expected to attend. Queen Fabiola of Belgium and Queen Sophia of Spain will be there, so will Poland's Mrs Danuta Walesa. Doughty champions of the Third World will also attend, such as Mrs Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings of Ghana and Mrs Maryam Babangida of Nigeria.

Malaysia's Siti Hasmah Mohammed Ali will be there with her neighbour from Thailand, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. Interestingly, given restrictions on female rights in Algeria, two Arab first ladies are coming: Queen Noor of Jordan and Mrs Suzanne Mubarak of Egypt.

The summit will address a very real problem. In many parts of the developing world, women do most of the work in

the fields, but gain little of the financial rewards. They are often neglected in development strategies, even though they are the most vulnerable section of the community

when the economy is in the doldrums.

The plight of rural women is worsening, not improving. As men migrate in greater numbers from the countryside

to the cities, more and more rural households are headed by women who must assume full responsibility for their farms and families.

Some development experts

scoff at the idea that First Ladies are genuinely interested in helping women in the countryside, but the summit's purpose is to provide a role model that gives hope to rural women.

Allegra Morelli, conference executive secretary, says: 'The wives of head of state have great influence in Africa and Latin America, though perhaps less so in Asia. It's an excellent way of getting the issue of the poverty of rural women aired.'

Rural women are a positive 'engine for development,' she says. 'The trickle down theory (of development) did not work. Now we're going to try trickle up.'

The summit will not just provide a forum for the discussion of complex issues of the poverty of rural women. It also expects, as IFAD puts it, to present 'specific policies and actions that will create an enabling environment for rural women to pull themselves and their families out of perpetual poverty.'

The Rome-based agency was founded 15 years ago specifically to raise food production in the poorest regions of the world, and has developed expertise in targeting the poorest people in those re-

gions. Already, IFAD has found that women are particularly responsive to its initiatives. In Bangladesh, for example, women have seized on the Fund's lines of credit and, even when landless, have been assiduous in repaying their debts. They use IFAD loans to buy seeds, fertilizer and other products to increase harvests.

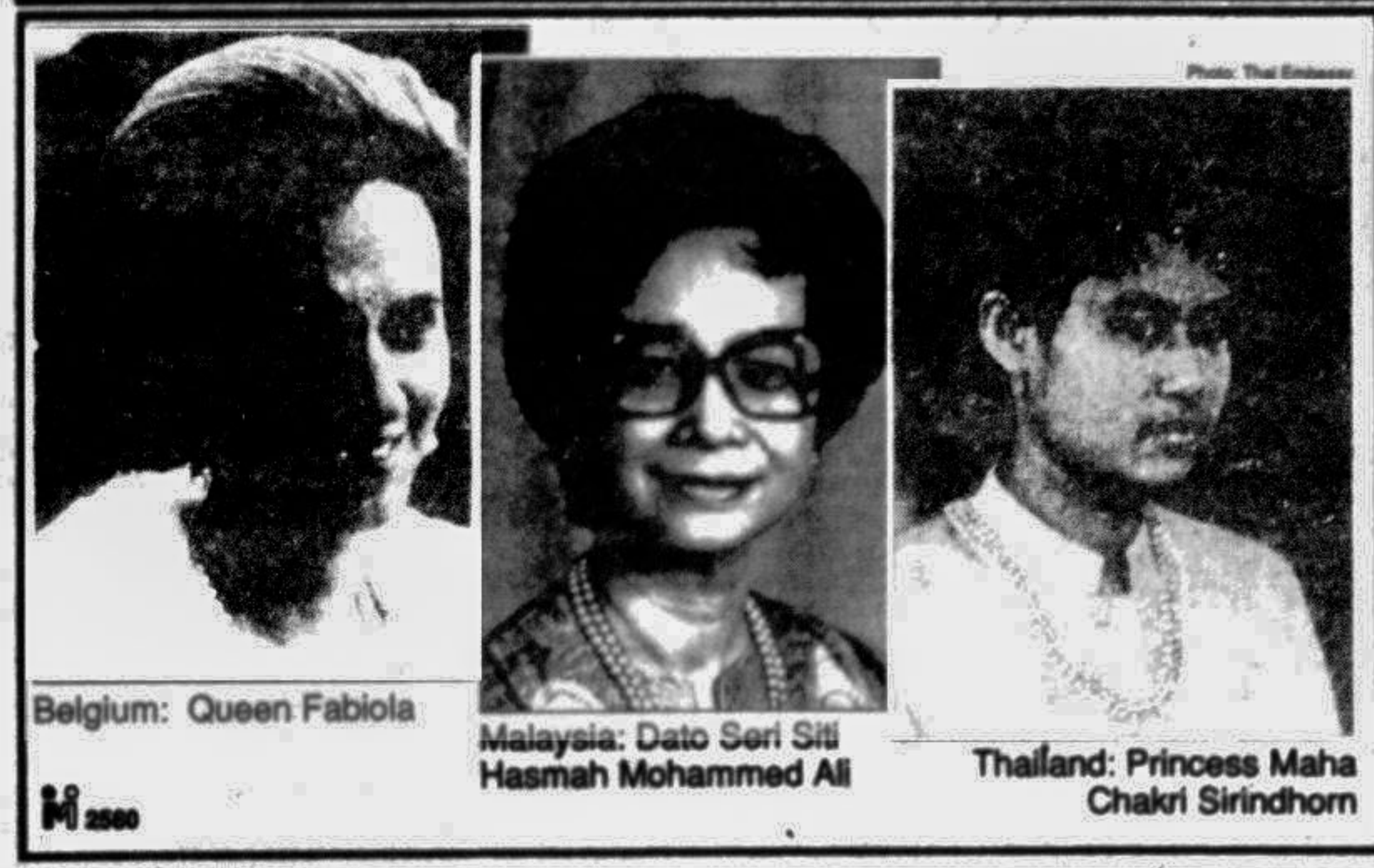
Many go further: They invest in small livestock or purchase equipment and materials for food processing and cottage industries, such as weaving. It all goes to boost their families' incomes in the midst of extreme poverty.

Idriss Jazairy, IFAD's Algerian president, knows that women's emancipation requires much more than the right to grow and profit from food, but sees the conference as an important part of the long struggle for sex equality. If women can demonstrate their skills and cost effectiveness in food production, he says, this will 'reduce the social and cultural reluctance' against them in some countries — particularly since this reluctance has an economic cause.

Women like Imelda Marcos, consort of the former president of the Philippines, have given first ladies a bad name in the past. Her present-day successors intend to put that to rights.

ANDREW LYCETT is a freelance journalist specialising in North Africa, the Middle East, and development issues.

Ladies of the summit



Belgium: Queen Fabiola

Malaysia: Dato Seri Siti Hasmah Mohammed Ali

Thailand: Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn

Our Electronic Products : A Popular Review

by A Mawaz

THE exhibition of Bangladeshi electronic products held in Dhaka Sheraton Hotel on February 5 and 6 was not only interesting, but encouraging also: revealing potentialities for self-sufficiency, and also for export of certain items.

In fact PABX telephones are being exported to Vietnam and some other countries. Quite a few companies are engaged for many years in the assembly of TV sets: the cheapest being the B/W 14-inch TV set at Taka 4,800. Several brands of locally made automatic voltage regulators (AVRs) and uninterruptible power supply systems (UPS) were on exhibition. With a little regulation, restructuring and coordination, the prices could be brought down.

A major exhibitor put on show something new and exciting, the use of solar panels for running TV sets and other equipment. There are very few individual TV owners who

would be willing to dish out Taka 18,000 for a solar power supply system. The French sources could be tapped, as she has a well developed technology in this field. Unless the import duty of 60 per cent is brought down, the benefit cannot be passed down to the rural area, where solar power supplies are needed most: especially in the coastal and cyclone zones.

Strangely, one application was overlooked by the exhibitors, the use of solar panels as back cover of the cabinets of radio sets, eliminating the use of once-use-only dry batteries. The replacement of which cost a couple of hundred taka per annum, which the village homes can hardly afford. In fact, Unesco had developed some prototype solar radio sets for use in the developing countries. The initial extra expenditure on such a new radio set could be recovered in less

than two years, as the batteries have not to be replaced (there is a small dry rechargeable battery inside).

This being the first exhibition of its kind, the public response was quite good in site outside a hotel would be more inviting, and many of the exhibitors ran out of literature. There were also no information kits for the press. From the response evoked, it was quite clear that two days are not enough, as many consumer products were on display.

It was revealing to find that video cassettes are being assembled by at least two firms, one being set up in 1986. The Government's decision to set up an EPZ for electronic products is timely: as technical collaborations and tie-ups could result in export of several consumer and industrial items. The local entrepreneurs, who are quite resourceful, can thrive in suitable environment, which is lacking; as also the dearth of financing arrangements for mass production, to bring down the

cost of production. Bangladesh's huge population ensures a big potential market, but tapping methods have to be carefully examined by the policy makers.

The electric-metre-wallas were very much in evidence. This business must be very competitive. This visitor had no time to discuss the quality control aspects in the local industry, as electronic components are extremely sensitive to heat, humidity and dust; and of course, the fluctuating power supply, in addition to transients and voltage surges, which are a common feature in the tropical zone.

Some of the locally made table lamps and luminaries should be quite acceptable, judging by the products of at least one of the manufacturers (Swadesh, 29 years). Thanks to PDB/DESA, the family men were looking at the AVRs for their electrical appliances (TV, washing machine, fridge, freezer, computer, etc.). These

units are rather expensive, around Taka 5,000. The manufacturers could market cheap units embedded inside the standard electric power plug, for direct insertion into the socket (for low power applications only), doing away with the black box. Power extension boards can be made incorporating voltage regulators, which are quite handy for use at home.

The local water cooler has made its appearance. It provides cold drinking water, hygienically pure, and without ice. Since our *madir dokans* (grocery shops) are now being equipped with refrigerators and freezers, the introduction of water coolers in the smaller restaurants (on hire-purchase by instalments) would open up a wide market, as it did in neighbouring India.

The next show is quite capable of turning into a big fair.

The writer is an international consultant to the electronics industry.

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.

MPs and privileges

Sir, Frankly I was ashamed to read that our Sangsad members, whom we so energetically voted as our representatives in the Parliament, have all been so thoughtful about themselves as to double their remuneration, increase insurance coverage and conveyance allowance, enhance constituency allowance and discretionary funds and also get granted enhanced salaries to the President, Prime Minister and Speaker plus the privilege that each can import a car without custom duty and above all the all new privilege of granting pension to the MPs. I need not describe the innumerable benefits they can obtain exerting their influence as MPs. It is strange that this has been unanimously passed and even the very few opposition members who raised objection were so squeamish that the MPs had no qualms of conscience to write blank cheques and take undue advantage of the people's trust reposed in them. Just now as I write this letter a news was telecast that the President, PM and the Cabinet Ministers would not take enhanced salaries till June 1992, perhaps for some agitation by the students and a section of the public. Nothing has, however, been said of the decision of the MPs. This reminds me of Joseph de Maistre who said 'every country has the government it deserves' and of Aristotle who said 'the Government of a country is a mirror of its people'.

I would conclude this letter with the well-known story of Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddique (R.A) who, the next day after he was elected the first Caliph, was going to the market with a load of cloth to sell. He was stopped by the other companions of Prophet Muhammad (SM), including Hazrat Umar (R.A), that he should attend to more important work of the

state and that his loss in business would be compensated from the public exchequer. So pious and simple was he that when, after a few days, his wife prepared a little sweet for the family, he enquired of this luxury and slashed his usual allowance to just enough for sustenance and no luxury. It was with such spirited sincerity that Islam gained respect and welded hundreds of nations and clans into a cosmopolitan state.

Now may I leave to the readers to compare and contrast the thoughtfulness of the first Caliph of Islam with the selfish thoughtfulness of the 'first citizens' of their respective constituencies of our country? And guess what sort of a country we live in!

Jalalur Rahman Khan
Mohammadpur, Dhaka.

Export Bangladesh medicines

Sir, Now that the spokesmen of our pharmaceutical industries have confirmed that Bangladesh is in a position to export quality medicines and earn foreign exchange, the authorities should seriously be studying the proposal. In this regard, I propose a new slogan: 'From Smuggling to Export.'

The potentialities of our cheap labour are not being properly treated in all the sectors. We forget, in our poverty, that manpower is the greatest asset of a country, once the liabilities are contained. The industrialised nations are facing zero or negative growth rates and shifting their factories to developing countries. A few such DCs have become saturated, and Bangladesh is now on the list. The reforms in the neighbouring countries should be carefully studied, to maintain and sharpen our competitive edge.

The majority of the international manufacturers should be located in a country of 110 million, with the highest density of population in the world, provided the infrastructure and the investment climate, and amenities are attractive.

We appear to miss the bus. One Japanese expert advised that instead of bringing the Bangladesh workers to Japan, the Japanese factories could come here, thereby preventing many social complications. We are the bargaining type, and we haggle in an unpleasant manner (notwithstanding national interests).

Why the Opposition is silent on these issues? The foreigners want to hear their concurrence in these areas; and not statements in support of hartals and demands, and suspected spoiling of the labour front by not condemning lawlessness.

Unfortunately, that is the way I see it — the Opposition is welcome to clarify the position to the public. There should be no 'politics' in joint national efforts. They should not display their discontent list in and out of season. Negative statements do not do anybody any good.

A citizen

Chittagong Passport Office

Sir, For the last few months a practically new phenomenon is fast taking shape in the Chittagong Passport Office i.e. 'non-issuance of passports due to so-called non-receipt of police verification reports'. When the question is raised as to when the passport will be given, the reply invariably is 'please collect the police verification report from the officials of the court or from the DIB office cops.'

Recently the undersigned had gone to the said PP office with a friend in this connection. Out of a crowd of 50 persons none raised a single word except a frail looking housewife challenged the clerk as to that being the sole responsibility of the PP office and not the PP applicant to run after the cops for such an unholy, irrelevant and unheard of exercise.

Perhaps this is a test case, novel method of corruption being introduced and promoted by the bureaucracy commencing from Chittagong! Unless this test case baby is nipped in the bud, very soon it shall mature into a monster hard, if not impossible, to beat. From this column of The Daily Star I like to appeal to all relevant authorities, the benign PM and the Ministries to kindly look into this matter and issue such instructions for the quickest disposal of all such cases.

Salauddin
Chittagong.

How's that?

Sir, Bangladesh is 'down and out!' May be yes, may be no. No matter what, cricket in Bangladesh is alive and well even with the national team's defeat in both the friendly matches against India's West Bengal team in Dhaka that swept off most of the expectations, speculations, and computations dimming their aspirations for early test berth.

The test of Bangladesh's prowess was rather a unique lesson domestic cricket circle learnt from the showdown only to face now fast-paced question like how to drive the poor image straight on to a respectable position.

From what fields the highlights of the performance of native Bangladeshi cricketers on the home ground pulls the total progress made so far over to the boundary of domestic sports personnel reserved for credit claims.

The agony of defeat, however, calls in local cricket pundits to follow on with their capacity re-assessed before improving the stance of their team line-up. Much depends also on the buddies to underscore their aptitude for bouncing national standard up, regardless of who says what.

Besides, like many success stories preceded by setbacks, Bangladeshis can possibly count their hopes in hooking their underdog standing off to the test status; and that target will have had Bangladesh cricket buffs on forward stride keeping Bangladeshi cricket a gentlemen's game.

M Rahman
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OPINION

BCCI — A Great Tragedy

F Hussain

I recollect with pleasure having been intimately connected with BCCI Bangladesh as a depositor and a client. Its service I remember is incomparable because it had built a tradition of a very high standard of banking efficiency and sophistication where business was embellished with a warm human touch.

With the BCCI's operation suspended since July 06, 1991 I not only miss this human touch but also feel depressed to transact my business elsewhere — where no warmth of relationship exists. I know many pension holders who kept their life's savings in this bank only for the warmth of its enlightened staff who cared so much for their clients' well being, are also now in distress.

After the BCCI's debacle I cannot question the prudence of one of my acquaintances, Mr X, for deciding not to deposit his money with any bank as he may think it safer to forgo interest rather than to run the risk of losing the principal. In such a situation public confidence in the banking system itself can be rudely shaken and shattered.

Foreign nationals and Bangladeshis having Non-resident Foreign Currency Fixed Deposit (NFCFD) account in US Dollar and Pound Sterling have been paid in full including interest.

But Bangladeshis having account in local currency only have been paid only Taka fifty thousand per head. This is the kind of discriminatory treatment that our own currency gets from our authorities.

The fate of the BCCI Bangladesh along with that of its thousands of depositors, clients and employees is bogged down in the mire of official indecision although it was quite a viable and most efficiently run bank. It may be noted here that it is in full operation in Pakistan, Panama, Zambia, Mauritius, Nigeria, Sri Lanka while some other countries are expediting the process of reopening it. They

prefer to act on the principle of removing the priest for his misdeeds to closing the doors of the temple. Here we seem to believe that 'in Adam's fall we sinned all.'

BCCI Bangladesh can be reasonably proud of the fact that it earned a net profit of Taka 11 crore and paid the Government of Bangladesh Taka 6 crore as tax in 1991. What an irony of fate that the employees of this bank are being penalised, rather than rewarded, for this outstanding success and excellent performance. Instead of granting them the usual annual increment in 1991, in recognition of their success in earning profit, their salaries have reportedly been cut by half. As a result, most of the nearly 400 employees with thousands of their dependents are sure to face a serious economic crisis. Some of them perhaps, have already been served with notice of ejection by the landlords for non-payment of rent. Where will they go now? Can there be a worse example of putting a premium on efficiency?

The State Minister for Finance reportedly said in the Jatiya Sangsad that the Government had no knowledge of this cut. If this is so, who issued such cruel order? The controlling authority, the Bangladesh Bank, should know and enlighten us. Some one must take the responsibility.

Salaries and financial benefits in many forms of the privileged people are raised, sky high. Nobody grudges reeling of the overrolled of the local saying goes). But why be so unkind to the poor employees of the bank which has run profitably?

It is our earnest hope that the People's Government of Bangladesh will take appropriate steps for reopening of the BCCI Bangladesh which has set an example of professional proficiency in banking in this country.