

March of history

The March of 1971 saw the Bengali nation begin its inexorable march towards independence. The roots of this march lay in a thousand year history of separate growth, in a political experiment whose basic premise was betrayed at the very outset, in the personality of a leader to whom the cultural and linguistic identity of the majority of the people of Pakistan was less important than his personal belief. It lay in the mindset of a bureaucratic political elite whose main concern was to perpetuate its stay in power, in the over-ambition of a military leadership whose love of military aggrandisement sucked the very vitals of the state called Pakistan. Finally it lay in the unbroken history of exploitation, oppression and betrayal of the rights of the Bengali people by the leaders of the then West Pakistan.

Denied of genuine legislative representation, deprived of a fair share of the economic benefits, much of which was realised at our cost anyway, and gradually drained of whatever natural wealth we possessed, the Bengali nation was confronted with another act of betrayal, when on 1st March 1971 the President of Pakistan, Gen Yahya postponed the convening of the National Assembly, scheduled for the 3rd of the month. Thus once again moves were afoot to deprive the Bengali nation of their political, economic and cultural rights.

Eversince Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's massive electoral victory — a landslide in East Pakistan (167 seats out of 169) and an absolute majority in the Pakistan National Assembly (167 out of 313) — forces were put into action to somehow nullify the verdict of the Bengali people. Bhutto put his considerable clout with the military hierarchy into play and persuaded President Yahya to postpone the inaugural session of the Assembly. This action however triggered a whole range of reaction for which the Pakistani military rulers were hardly prepared.

The outburst against this betrayal was spontaneous and massive. Suddenly the talk of independence was all around and came to be the focal point of all political demands. Students and the general public began to chant slogans of independence by the thousands. The non-violent and non-cooperation movement — called by Bangabandhu—that followed revealed the bankruptcy of the Pakistani rule. It became obvious that they ruled only in name and whatever credibility they had till then was lost with that fateful announcement.

To the Bengali people, the conclusion was inescapable. To survive as a people with our distinct culture, language and history, the Pakistani state machinery was proving to be a dangerous antagonist. Our only option, to live with dignity, was independence, a conclusion reinforced by what the Pakistani regime did during the rest of the days of March.

For us, those glorious days of March '71 gave us a lesson in people's power the likes of which the world had rarely seen. As we witnessed the machinery of the Pakistani state grind to a halt because of the spontaneous support extended to the call of Sheikh Mujib for the non-violent, non-cooperation movement, we saw dramatically exhibited before us that power, after all, did not emanate from the barrel of a gun (which the Pakistanis thought) but from the support of the people, that our cause had. One day at a time, our strength grew during those days of March and one day at a time we came closer to the day when we would become independent. As we now know, as sea of blood was to separate those March days from the days of our independence. But on the 1st of the March 1971, our only goal was to march forward. And we did, never looking back even for an instant.

The Challenges for AL

A major challenge facing the meeting of the extended committee of the Awami League (AL), starting today, is to make the organisation conscious of its role as an alternative government within the framework of the parliamentary system that is functioning in the country today. The success of the system depends as much on the way the opposition functions, inside and outside the parliament, as on the manner in which the ruling party carries out its responsibilities. To say that both have failed in their respective fields would sound uncharitable. The truth is, neither has proved to be much of a success so far in meeting the challenges inherent in the system.

However, there is hardly any need for despair. The just-concluded extended meeting of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) provided some positive indications that the ruling party may be setting its house in order, with its chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia paying much-needed attention to feedback from the rank and file. It is now the turn of AL to devise its own way of creating organisational cohesion, based on a collective decision-making process, and strengthening its credibility as a responsible opposition platform. It is expected to run down the government on issues where the administration may well be at fault. However, it is also required to offer its alternative solutions in support of its criticisms. It is for the AL leadership to decide how this should be done. One thing is certain. The choice does not lie with the chairperson Sheikh Hasina alone. It is very much a matter of shared responsibility among members of the party presidium and, indeed, at different committee levels.

Once the AL leadership is clear in its mind about the organisation's role in the system that it worked so hard to bring into being, it would be guided more by a national perspective than by partisan considerations and by clear policy directions rather than by rhetoric. It may then appreciate that mutual recriminations in which BNP and AL often outdo each other only to aggravate the divisiveness in the country, reducing the prospects of a national consensus on formidable issues facing the country.

We will regard the two-day AL meeting a success if at least some, if not all, of these messages are heard, loud and clear, by all concerned, especially by the leadership of the organisation.

The Indigenous Basis of Industrialisation

If we analyse the pattern of industrialisation of the newly industrialising countries (NICs) as well as other countries, for example Thailand, who are now waiting at the doorstep of the NIC club, or for that matter if we consider the past history of development of the industrialised countries, then one steadfast conclusion strongly emerges: Each pattern of industrial growth is more distinctive and unique in its details though broadly at the outset, similarities might overshadow the divergences of the patterns. In any industrial development strategy, the points at which the respective structures vary are the vital sources of growth for that country.

These differentials manifest the indigenous basis of industrialisation which must be aggressively sought and very carefully nurtured. South Korea went in for steel mills and heavy industries through the promotion of very large industrial conglomerates in the private sector. Thailand concentrated on food processing while Malaysia today is the world's leading manufacturer of integrated circuits.

Even though textile industry has rapidly expanded in all the countries mentioned above, in terms of the size of individual units, the types of textile produced and the upstream and the downstream concentration within the textile industry group as a whole, there are significant differences. These dissimilarities are attempts by the entrepreneurs to adjust and secure maximum competitive advantage from local conditions, past experience, the prevailing value structure, cultural traits, etc., apart from the basic economic realities that exist.

Korean, Thai, Malaysian Experience

The heavy industry developed in Korea because of the

national security consideration when the military priorities, because of the threat from the North, were considered together with the priorities for development. In addition, the Japanese experience, due to close proximity as well as being a former Japanese colony, left strong impressions in the Korean mind. Large corporate bodies were therefore promoted. As a result, Mitsubishi of Japan is being complemented by Hyundai of South Korea.

As much as 70 per cent of the land area in Thailand was under forest even in the late 1950s. Within the following 20 to 25 years, the statistics more than reversed itself. Today less than one-fourth of the land area can be classified as forest. The great expansion in cultivation as well as introduction of new crops together with considerable increase in the size of the Thai fishing fleets led to the concentration of food and agro processing industries.

Emergence of Malaysia as the World's leading manufacturer of integrated circuits had its beginning in the neighbouring city state of Singapore where due to significant locational advantages, an early beginning was made in the setting up of electronic industries. Very soon, however, both labour and land shortages were felt. Hence the spillover to peninsular Malaysia where, in the mean time, supporting infrastructures had also been built.

Naive Approach

To say that labour intensive manufacturing for export should be the basis for future industrialisation of Bangladesh reveals nothing in terms of either the strategy that must be followed or the eventual industrial structure that should emerge within a stipulated time period. Labour is cheap in Bangladesh; so import the materials and the components; cut and paste or screw up the joints and produce the garments, toys, shoes and the

electronic goods for export. As a result, employment will be generated, the economy will grow and then what? Do we live happily ever after?

To say the least, this is a very naive approach to industrial development. Labour is cheap in Bangladesh but steady work habits are rare. Labour unrest is rampant and hartal is the agonizing reality of life. Continuous operation of factories round the year with 2 to 3 shifts per day cannot be assured. Labour intensive manufacturing enterprise automatically implies an equity investment of Taka 2 to 10 million employing hundreds of workers in each factory doing highly organised repetitive work in assembly line production where group efforts rather than individual contributions

propensity to generate group pressure becomes highly attractive.

Counter to Development

By the two decades of independent existence of Bangladesh, there are many businessmen who have accumulated sufficient cash reserves which could be invested in labour intensive manufacturing for exports. No doubt quite a few have already done so but given the opportunities, such investments are not very many at all. On the other hand many people have borrowed from the industrial development bank but majority of such industries have not yet seen the light of the day. Consequently fixed deposits have piled up in the banks earning a steady return from the interest paid. A large part of such business in-

come from the interest will be secured.

Our culture, our environment, the patterns of our group behaviour are not conducive to organised, continuous efforts involving a large number of individuals. Therefore we should develop the appropriate industrial structure which fits in with the prevailing conditions — not otherwise.

We find that individual and family efforts in agriculture, among the weavers, potters, carpenters or in the small shops and even in pulling the rickshaws or plying the boats are tremendous. Efficiency is at the highest level. Individuals or families work to the best of their abilities in order to maximize their gains. Against all odds they survive in the roadside welding and repair shops when their productivity in spite of primitive equipment is high. The Dolal Khal metal working industries of Dhaka constitute a good example of what individualised small enterprises can do. But the same metal work on a large scale with 100 workers may not be successful. The example is the Machine Tools Factory whose output should exceed the total outputs of all the Dolal Khal metal workshops put together.

Ideal Structure

One very meaningful conclusion we can draw from the above discussions: the size of enterprise in Bangladesh context should be small, family operated and should employ very few hired workers. The handloom sector provides the best example of the ideal industrial structure that I am trying to explain. Here I mention that it is ideal in terms of structure only, not productivity.

According to 1990 Handloom Census there are 212,421 handloom units in Bangladesh, 99 per cent privately owned, each on the average operating 2 to 3 looms with 5 weavers at least 2 of whom are females and the

majority of the workers are drawn from the family of the owner who himself is a weaver and performs multiple functions as the manager-owner of the small enterprise.

This is the type of structure that should prevail in Bangladesh. Such small enterprises however cannot be established as the common trend unless and until productivity is increased manifold. According to the same Handloom Census, the monthly average cloth production per operational loom amounts to only 274.4 yds., which is too low. New types of looms are required which should increase output significantly. Herein lies the challenge of a major engineering innovation of new types of power looms and other modern equipment that fit in with the optimum scale dictated by the compulsion to develop modern small scale family enterprises for textile weaving.

Opportunities for such enterprise already exist in metal working industry, ceramics, plastic goods, garments, varieties of handicraft products, gems and jewellery, toys, artificial flowers etc. Through subcontracting arrangements many manufactured exports are amenable to such economies of small to micro scale operation. Even in case of engineering and electronic goods, components could be manufactured by small family enterprises, while the central assembly plant might be a unit with few hundred workers producing the final product.

Let few thousand such small family enterprises spread out all over Bangladesh. It would bring to light the indigenous base for industrialization which satisfies the prevailing conditions or obviates the constraints induced by such conditions. The industrial structure that would emerge would be unique. This uniqueness will be the vital source for rapid industrial growth.

From LDC to NIC by Shahed Laif

in total harmony with one another are of primary concern to maintain high levels of productivity.

The conditions as described above is difficult to obtain in Bangladesh not only because of hartals and unrest — it goes much beyond that. I think that we Bengalis are very independent minded. We thrive better when working alone or in small groups consisting of close relations or the neighbours from the same village.

We have strong loyalty to our family not in the restricted western sense but for the traditional extended family. Next comes our immediate neighbourhood or village loyalty. To the company we work for, particularly when it employs a large number of workers, loyalty tends to be rather weak. Instead, in large groups of organised labour we sometime become agitational at the loss of individual freedom. The specter of exploitation of many by the few or one individual owner is a too vivid reality in our minds. As a result, the

come, indentor's commission or remittance from earnings abroad have been invested in luxury housing and expensive cars which are counter to industrial development. During the last ten years few hundred crore Taka such have been spent for such unproductive purposes which straightaway implies critical opportunities foregone to invest in at least few hundred small to medium scale manufacturing enterprises for export.

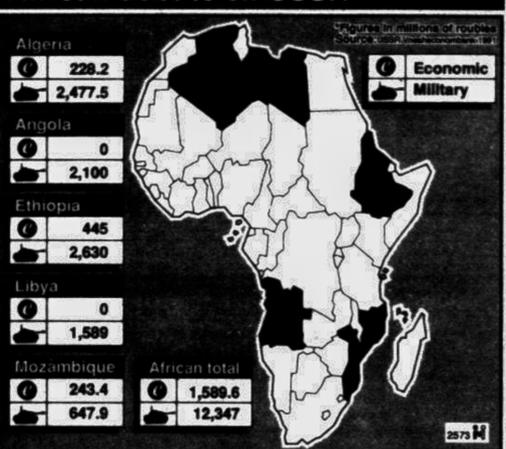
But what are the explanations for these counter-developments? First, a part of such funds are not tax free money, might be ill-gotten, generally known as black money. Secondly, even if government allows, no question asked for such black money to be invested in manufacturing enterprises, there is still no assurance that the desired investment would take place. People with money are reluctant to invest. They are afraid of labour trouble. So why bother, let the money remain idle in the bank and without any effort whatsoever, a hand-

Broke Russians Demand Debt Payment from Africa

Charles Quist Adade writes from St. Petersburg

During the Cold War the former Soviet Union was seen as being on the side of the developing countries. It helped many of them with economic and military aid. Now, cash-starved Kremlin leaders are demanding the repayment of debt from their erstwhile allies in Africa and other developing regions. They have mapped out strategies to retrieve the more than 45 billion roubles owed to the former communist regime by various developing countries. Over 30 African countries owe Moscow 13.9 billion roubles. Out of this, 12.3 billion, or 89 per cent, covers arms deliveries.

African debt to ex-USSR



plans are afoot to get countries like Angola and Congo pay off their debts in their local currencies.

Before the ex-Soviet Union was decreed out of existence it was on the verge of selling parts of the Third World debts to credit institutions.

The indebted countries were expected under a special accord to pay back their debts not directly to Moscow, but to the firms, which in turn would pay back the Soviet Union 10 per cent less than actual total debt.

The new Kremlin economists have also decided to have parts of the African debts converted into shares

and bonds issued by joint ventures under specified conditions.

Meanwhile, the Moscow News complained that certain African nations, led by Nigeria are taking advantage of the "incompetence of republican and inter-republican authorities" and are selling off their debts "with fabulous rebates of between 30 and 40 per cent."

The weekly said African countries have discovered that it was more advantageous and expedient to sell of their debts to Russian entrepreneurs in their own country.

Since 1985 when President Mikhail Gorbachev inaugurated glasnost Moscow had been sys-

tematically cutting credits to nearly all African and other developing countries. In 1989 it stopped granting aid altogether.

But the debts continued to mount on account of new arms deliveries, as well as raw materials an equipment for ongoing projects built with Soviet assistance, so are the interests on deferred loans.

Meantime, Soviet trade return with African countries fell from 3.4 billion convertible roubles in 1984 to 2.0 billion roubles.

Up to forty per cent debt cuts for Africa's poorest debtor nations, announced by the Kremlin in 1989, were never implemented as the general public demanded cutting economic ties with developing nations. As the argument went, the Soviet Union always gave out everything and never received anything back in return.

With empty shop counters and ever-falling standards of living it is easy for ordinary Russians to make Africa a scapegoat for their economic woes.

In the Kremlin, however, pragmatic considerations are behind the desire to demand repayment of Africa's debt. The ex-Soviet Union was reeling under a heavy budget deficit and foreign debt of \$70 billion.

In Africa, \$5 billion was spent by the ex-Soviet Union backing the Luanda government in the Angolan civil war between 1977 and 1978. \$1 billion went to Mozambique between 1975 and 1985 and about \$5 billion to Ethiopia from 1975 to 1986.

In addition, Moscow was involved in hundreds of industrial and agricultural projects in Africa and nearly 50,000 African specialists were trained in the Soviet Union during the past 30 years.

But observers here say Africans are being merely used as scapegoats for Russia's own economic problems. They contend that although Africa's debt constitute a mere 30 per cent of the total Third World debts to the ex-Soviet Union it is only the continent's indebtedness that has attracted a noisy campaign in the media.

Said an African university student here: "The press deliberately gloss over the fact that more than two thirds of the debt covers military deliveries and that the ex-USSR financed military projects in certain African countries not out of sheer altruism but to carve spheres of influence and to safeguard her geopolitical interest on the continent during the era of the East-West confrontation."

Unquestionably, the scapegoat sentiments had its effect on the Russian public. A recent opinion poll here showed that many believe one of the causes of Russian economic woes is "generous Soviet assistance to African and other Third World countries."

For many years the ex-USSR maintained that the first communist country in the world saw it as its internationalist duty to offer "free, disinterested aid" to fraternal countries in the developing world to enable them "overcome im-

perialist subjugation and neo-colonial exploitation by Western capitalist countries."

However, as an African diplomat in Moscow said: "the so-called disinterested aid was also to finance Soviet interests in Africa."

That is why, he continued, the greatest chunk of Soviet assistance was directed to socialist Africa "to consolidate and defend socialist gains."

Yeltsin and his team say that they do not bear any responsibility for political mistakes of the former communist leaders in Africa and other parts of the Third World. Their strategy is to take advantage of the peace dividend coming from Gorbachev's new thinking which signalled the end of the Cold War to swap military debts for sausages.

But while the Russians swap Africa's military debts for Western sausage and African bananas, who will return the thousands of innocent Angolans, Mozambicans and Ethiopians who were victims of Soviet-made Kalashnikovs?

This may serve as a timely lesson for the African peoples as they approach the threshold of multiparty democracy never again to allow corrupt leaders, who, seeking to entrench themselves in power run to the East for arms "to protect socialist gains" or to the West to "fight communists."

The Cold War may be over, but the military-industrial complexes in both the East and the West are still churning out armaments. What is more, the hard currency-starved members of the newly-formed Commonwealth of Independent States are eager to sell arms to anyone.

At the end of the day, however, it is the poor African taxpayer who bears the burden.

— GEMINI NEWS
CHARLES QUIST ADADE is a Ghanaian journalist currently studying for a PhD in St. Petersburg.

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.

Military Expenditures

Sir, There are two forces in human mind — good and evil. It should be the perpetual concern of the man to accelerate the good force thereby decelerating the evil one. But the world shows that at this stage of tremendous development of science and technology, still the evil forces overpower the good ones. Domestically,

one ethnic group tries to overpower the other militarily while internationally, a nation's most prolific brains persistently try to devise better means to destroy the other nations. These do not conform to the development of civilisation.

All these have transpired due to the fact that we have let our underlying evil forces to dominate our psychology. We, whoever may be else, should remember that life is for no

more than 60/70/80 years. In this short period of time, we should try to make the earth a better habitat for our progenies. Why do we need to resort to destruction? History does not respect the people who do not contribute to the people's welfare. There is no room for Hitler, Mussolini in the soft-corner of human heart.

It is learnt that had military expenditures of the nations been sharply reduced, all the people residing on this earth could have run a very happy life. We, everyone, need to think constructively, being aware of our psychological limitation that we tend to fail to contain our evil forces of mind.

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Ashkona-Naddapara-Dakshin Khan Road

Sir, The Ashkona-Naddapara-Dakshin Khan Road now being constructed by LGFB appears to be a "misnomer" because it is going through the southern part of the Naddapara touching Shialdanga and not through the Naddapara linking Ashkona via Naddapara to south of Miapara towards Dakshin Khan Bazar. We do not understand the mystery why and how the road has been diverted from its original and meaningful approach.

The demand for construction of the said road has long been standing, for over 12 years, and repeated mass appeals through petitions signed

by thousands of local people of the affected areas have been made. Request for gas connection to stop illegal use of electricity has also been remaining unheeded.

Prime Minister's election promise to build these roads and provide gas connection seems to have fallen into cold storage as signs of effective works or activities are not visible still today.

Will the authorities concerned rise to the occasion to develop infra-structure in this neglected village and fulfil the hopes and aspirations of the people?

M A Rub,
Naddapara, Dakshin Khan,
Uttara.

Letter-writers forum

Sir, Now that a 'Letter Writers Forum' has been formed with the objective to coordinate ideas, suggestions and complaints of the citizens with a view to obtaining response from the concerned authorities to the important national issues, the interested letter-writers may contact its convener, Col (ret'd) Shaif Mirza at 82/F, Road No. 5 Banani, Dhaka or Member, Mr. M. A. Jalil, at 372/B, Kilgaon, Dhaka. Tel: 403060.

The letter-writers may coordinate and cooperate with the forum to realize the objectives.

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