

A People who are Prisoners in their Own Land

Barbara Nimri Aziz writes from West Bank

Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza live like prisoners in their own land. Israeli military checkpoints dot the landscape. For children in Ramallah and El Bireh cities the curfew is a way of life. Economic pressures on Palestinians are immense because few have jobs. Families survive on remittances from relatives abroad. A Gemini News Service correspondent reports on the increasingly difficult plight of the Palestinians.



PALESTINIAN REFUGEES
Generations in despair

Occupied Territories largely because of these overseas ties. Money from those sons and daughters now feeds a family of 10 or more in a home where no one can find work.

With so many unemployed and workers unable to leave their towns to seek work in Jerusalem or other parts of the West Bank, these remittances are just not enough. People need more than cash. They need a future and they search for it outside. This could lead to more immigration.

What happened within hours of the Jewish settler's death was typical. The entire area was shut down. Troops and helicopters swooped on El Bireh. Curfew was enforced and no Arab knew how long it would last.

After the fifth day families were given a two-hour respite to shop for food. The children burst into the front gardens for those hours. A mother rushed to her brother-in-law's home to ask them to put a call through to her daughter in New York.

Barely one in five households has a phone. Fewer have a car. Families must go to a neighbour or to a hospital to call a taxi. The few who dare venture out for such emergencies are old men and women. Young men might be shot. Anyone faces fines of 350 sheqel for being found on the street.

The Israeli military took up a position on the spot where the settler died. They built a

lookout tower on a three-story building. These lookouts are a common feature of the landscape throughout the West Bank and Gaza. The Israeli flag is posted on them, several heavily armed men pace the post, binoculars peering, machine-guns in hand.

The lookouts appear increasingly on main roads, in towns, on back roads, and at intersections. They mass around every refugee camp and perch above market squares.

During curfews it seems confining the Palestinians to their homes is not enough. There, too, they can be invaded. Those windowed rooms are but cells into which any Israeli can intrude. And they do.

Moving from house to house, soldiers march in, smashing windows and furniture, confiscating anything they decide is nationalist. They especially search for literature and valuables.

Muna, who had migrated back to Ramallah in 1990 from the US, burned her precious collection of political books when she heard about the house-to-house search. Um Odeh tore up a list of prisoners she was raising funds for and flushed it down the drain. Um Bassam buried her gold bracelets.

The soldiers always find someone or something to take. They took Bassam, Mousa, Yusuf and Mohammed. They took a family's legal file hold-

ing newspaper clippings and correspondence and legal papers of their son's trial and imprisonment.

In the new year the full curfew in Ramallah and El Bireh was replaced by a 13-hour evening confinement. The Israelis do not call it a curfew, simply a new law. It lays down regulations for Palestinian movements between 5 pm and 6 am. This protects, they say, Jewish settlers driving in the area on their way to their fortified settlements.

For Palestinians, it means virtual curfew. No one may go into the streets during these hours, not to a neighbour or a relative, not to the mosque or corner shop. Men's evening assemblies at the mosques are cancelled. Taxis may not operate. It means young men who are without work all day cannot enjoy the fellowship of friends in the evening.

It also means the end of all evening business — for taxi drivers, for cafe owners, for hairdressers. More importantly, restricted movement out of these towns is a further step to cut the people from Jerusalem, their cultural, religious and economic centre.

The new laws institutionalise Israeli prison conditions for the entire civilian population of these Arab communities.

Palestinians flood visitors with accounts of fines or prison sentences. Yet no one, old or young, would say that it was a mistake to kill the Jewish settler. Most feel the incident was just a pretext for the Israelis to enforce prepared plans. — GEMINI NEWS

BARBARA NIMRI AZIZ, a freelance journalist and anthropologist based in New York, recently visited the Occupied Territories.

Minister's Views Need a Second Look

Education Minister Jamiruddin Sircar could not be more correct when he observed, at a workshop on objective-type test and essay-type question in the SSC examination of 1992 on Tuesday, that a qualitative change in the examination system is a must for the over-all improvement of the country's education system. But his sweeping remark on the merit of objective-type test appears to be contentious for more than one reason. While extolling the virtue of the objective-type test, the education minister seems to have either confused things or missed some vital points in the process.

The minister's confusion concerns the issue of malpractices in the traditional system of examination. It sounds almost naive when one lays the blame of the adoption of unfair means in examination at the door of the system instead of the lapses in administration. The threat of malpractices in the objective test is equally — if not more — potent, for the single-word answers supplied mostly from outside will have better and more chances to find their ways into examination halls. Moreover, once the 'yes' or 'no' or the marking is done in answer, there is left no indication of the quality of the concerned examinee. But the touch of quality is unmistakable in the answer to a certain broad question.

What is of still greater importance is the fact that upto class X, students have or expected to come through what is called the basic education that primarily helps develop language skill and counting ability of the learners. The danger posed by the objective-type test is that it is expected to act as a positive disincentive to the innate quality of expression. Little does one feel the need to spread one's imagination and come out with anything creative. So the option before us is whether we intend to produce an army of unthinking robots or ones who can imagine, reason and, most importantly, relate the knowledge to life and nature.

How do we do this? It is simply outlandish to suggest that either of the two systems is perfect. A happy blend of the two may provide the real answer to the problem. That the objective-type question setting has its plus points is undisputed. But the objective-only also suffers from in-built inadequacies and defects which need to be complemented by the broad questions. Of the many such short-comings, the most damaging are the automatic chances of scoring at least 50 per cent mark simply going blindly for the test. At least that is what statistics say; and more, it is not just for an individual student but for all the numbers appearing at the test. Well, then, this can also be taken care of if the provision for deducting double the score for each wrong answer is left open. Medical colleges, let it be noted, have already introduced the method for the admission test.

So where do the arguments lead us to? If the system of administration is largely imperfect, no matter how sound the examination method is, the prospect of bringing about any qualitative improvement in either the examination method or the education system as a whole will remain illusive. As for the objective and for that matter broad type of examination, none can do the miracle alone. Rationally and happily blended, they can surely be complementary to each other. It is good to know that the Secondary Boards have thought it wise to go for such a mixed method. We hope they will not fall for the ministers' suggestion head over heel. Sure enough, the new system will be closely followed to identify its merits and demerits and thereby suggest further improvements where necessary. It is still under trial and therefore has scope for accommodating innovative ideas suitable for our situation.

'No' to Racism

This day marks the international communities' formal Declaration of Elimination of Racial Discrimination across the globe. Through the declaration by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966, came the international recognition that it is wrong to discriminate people on the basis of skin colour ethnicity. Fittingly, the protest this day 32 years ago against the infamous apartheid in South Africa is commemorated every year throughout the world. And this year — still more significantly — we are going to observe the day in the wake of the historic 'yes' vote in favour of F W de Klerk's on-going reform process in the white-all referendum in that country. Hopefully, this will lead to the complete dismantling of apartheid there soon.

If that prospect looks quite bright now, there is however no reason to be elated since the ethnic minority the world over are increasingly facing threat of persecution — in some cases they are actually undergoing this inhuman process — and other forms of repression. Ethnic minorities from Myanmar to Armenia to Yugoslavia have been undergoing such barbarous and cruel treatment, putting civilised societies to shame. Even in countries with a nice record of communal harmony, signs of stress and tension, now increasingly evident, portend ill omen not only for the countries concerned but also threaten to upset the global peace and harmony.

Colour consciousness and discrimination on the basis of ethnic differences, in our case, is a subtle form of racism of which many of us are not even aware. But the reality is that it makes a hell of a life for many in society. That a man should under no circumstances be judged by the colour of his skin or his racial background but by the quality of his head and heart is a considerably developed stage of human relations within society. But then discrimination in various forms still sour human relations. Much as we may claim to the contrary, peace and harmony in communal and caste relations have never been our strong points since the English had learnt how best to abuse the volatile situation. Parts of the sub-continent have often been consumed by such conflagration. The fire is still raging across the length and breadth of the Punjab. The heat of the Rohingya and Karen problem is now being terribly felt by Myanmar's neighbours.

Evidently, the world looks much less perfect than many would like to believe. Racism or hatred of people by people is a state, firstly, of mind and, then, of practice in violation of all principles and values of democracy which too is a concept perfected through practice. Therefore, the need for a secular and non-racial social environment for the healthy development of human mind has to be given priority in policy formulation by international communities.

EVERY child in the West Bank's Ramallah and El Bireh cities knows what a curfew is. No parental punishment can approach it. No confining illness compares with it. No bad weather can keep a child indoors in this way.

Military curfew belongs to a realm of life specially reserved for Palestinians today and it descends on them without rhyme or reason.

Yet it is now routine for the children of Ramallah and El Bireh, living under Israeli occupation. "What was excruciating and harsh is now normal," says a young man. "This (the evening curfew) is nothing to us anymore."

He explains: "It is like being in prison. The schools close because our children cannot go out. They are home all day on top of us, anxious and nervous, yelling, fighting with one another, wanting to do this and that."

"Some mothers try to teach their children. But without prior planning and contact with their teachers, it is useless. Our men cannot go to work. Many people here work in Beit Hannina and in Jerusalem. No work, no money. How do we feed ourselves?"

A curfew began last November after a Jewish settler was killed near El Bireh. It has been on and off ever since.

As the economic pressure on these people rises, Palestinian immigration may be increasing. Almost every family in Ramallah and El Bireh has a relative abroad — in the Gulf states, in Europe, in the United States or Canada, a son who left a decade ago, or others who emigrated after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Many families survive in the

IF 1990 was a year when the West rediscovered the United Nations and used it to forge a global consensus against Iraq, 1991 marked the conquest of the world organisation by the United States and its allies.

As the Soviet Union splintered, the world witnessed not only the death of superpower, but the end of multilateralism at the UN as well.

The only major triumph developing countries could claim was the selection by the Security Council of Egyptian deputy prime minister Boutros Ghali to succeed Javier Perez de Cuellar as the next Secretary-General. Seven Non-Aligned members blocked Western moves to disregard Africa's claims to the post.

Indian UN envoy Chinmaya Gharekhan says, "It demonstrated that NAM can unitedly obtain a satisfactory result, one which is of doubtful satisfaction to some of the major powers."

But after tightening its grip on the Security Council through a flurry of resolutions shackling Iraq at the end of the Gulf war, the US moved to dominate the political arena. In a symbolic show of strength, Washington in December 1991

UN Now Under US Control

Rajiv Tiwari writes from New York

With the demise of the Soviet Union, there is no longer any effective opposition to the US in the United Nations, allowing the sole superpower to dominate the world body.

Without the support of the Soviet Union which eliminated itself as a force during the General Assembly, the Third World engaged in rear guard actions to prevent Western onslaughts on its autonomy.

In his farewell address as Chairman of the 128-member Group of 77, Ghana's UN Representative Kofi Awoonor said, "We will defend our rights in a world which sees more and more every day, excessive dependence on might, bully tactics and abuse against the poor and the weak."

But he admitted, "Our task has become more difficult by the dramatic changes." He noted that the majority enjoyed by us in the UN is being whittled down by the appearance of new states on the Eastern European horizon.

Complex negotiations capped a campaign for its 'new world order' by organising the repeal by the Assembly of 1975 denunciation of Zionism.

After the historic vote, Arab and Third World delegates suddenly blamed each other for the outcome. But an ecstatic American diplomat was overheard saying it was clear the US can now get what it wants from the world body.

This was apparent even on non-political issues such as resolutions banning driftnet fishing. On this, the Japanese buckled to US pressure on the last day of the 46th session.

Revived Western support for the UN has been matched by uneasiness among Third World envoys about the organisation's future role. They say the 1990s promise to reverse earlier trends when developing states saw the UN as a useful policy instrument which the West did its best to blunt.

Gharekhan says, "We've had to conduct damage-limitation exercises in response to Western initiatives. The Assembly is being used by powerful countries in the new scheme of things."

What does Hasina's Claim Imply?

Ziaur Rahman Khan

Mr Suhrawardy from Ayub's prison there was launched a country-wide movement under the National Democratic Front (NDF) for the restoration of democracy in Pakistan. Among those leaders who so gallantly fought (and suffered) against the tyrannical Ayub regime was the father of our Leader of the Opposition.

Is she then trying to tell us and the world that as early as in 1961 we East Pakistanis were not really Pakistanis at heart, that we had become disloyal citizens of Pakistan and had secretly ceased to hold allegiance to the lawful entity called Pakistan. If so, then she has just endorsed the views of the Pakistani military bureaucratic clique and also approved the whole host of allegations in the infamous Agartala Conspiracy Case in which her father, along with 31 other East Pakistanis were implicated. This case has always through the last 25 years been condemned as bogus and a foul and malicious concoction prepared by the then regime to humiliate and belittle the people of this province. Yet, Sheikh Hasina's statement seems to carry an indictment more damning than anything the Ayub regime could cook up.

Such a statement may lend credibility to the Pakistani stand that we were conspiring to break Pakistan and hence justify if justification is at all possible, atrocity, brutality and the systematic persecution and genocide perpetrated by the barbaric Pakistani junta upon the unarmed and innocent people of East Pakistan. Except, they were not so innocent, if Sheikh Hasina's story is to be credited, because they had become since 1961 a disloyal perfidious and separatist people. The Pakistani army would then appear only to be endeavouring to preserve intact the geographical boundary of a lawfully constituted country. Surely, she could not have meant this. Sheikh Hasina's claim would also undermine the very foundation and moral basis for our war of independence — a war forced upon us. An unjust war forced upon a peaceful, democratic people whose only crime was

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.

Bank and government

Sir, Common men having little knowledge of business of bank and other financial institutions but operating accounts in various banks, mainly small savers, know that there is a contract, between the bank and the accounts-holders, the latter to keep their money in the bank for certain specified reasons including security being the prime one. The banks in their turn are to ensure safety of the fund kept with them and in lieu of their utilising the fund in commercial ventures, grant to the account-holders a certain rate of profit. But the depositors' right to draw their own money in time of need is the foremost above everything.

The government owes responsibility to safeguard such interest of the subjects and it is believed that the Central Bank and the Ministry of Finance have some sort of control and governance over the institutions dealing with fiscal matters. Curiously enough, the authorities quite arbitrarily imposed Jamuna, Relief, Development and other charges, which are, however, not in vogue anywhere in the globe.

It is really a wonder for the common men to realise as to what kind of supervisory control the Bangladesh Bank and the Ministry of Finance exercise over all other banks, insurance and other financial institutions. The people in general know that government grants permits to such institutions to function in the country after keeping a certain amount as security and apparently re-

the fitness of things if only the authorities could tell the people what more time they are likely to take to arrive at a tangible solution in the matter, which is really aching the mind of many.

R/Hussain
Gopibag, Dhaka.

Alice in Wonderland

Sir, It seems that there is some confusion among two of your readers (Shireen Bari and Md Ghulam Murtaza) about who wrote 'Alice in Wonderland'. I would like to clear this matter.

One day, 130 years ago, a shy, timid man took three little girls out in a boat on the Thames. His name was Dodgson. That is not the name we know him by; but that is his real name. He taught mathematics at Oxford. He told the girls a story about a little girl who went to sleep and disappeared down a rabbit hole and awoke in Wonderland.

The girls, after listening to the story, begged the professor to write the story for them; so he sat up all night doing it. And since one of the little girls had the name of Alice, he called the story 'Alice in Wonderland'. He put the story away and forgot all about it. Years later, a friend of his came across the manuscript, read it, was enthralled by it and insisted on publishing it. But Professor Dodgson was shocked! What? Was he, a professor of mathematics at Oxford, going to let the world know that he wrote a nonsense story for children? No! It was beneath his dignity! He wouldn't think of it.

So when 'Alice in Wonderland' was published, it came out under an assumed name — Lewis Carroll. But his full real name was Charles L. Dodgson.

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OPINION

come end to decades of sharp debates which usually ended with the US and its allies being outgunned by a brute majority on all major questions. But the taming of the Assembly also foretold a reduced Third World role.

And Ghana's Awoonor warned that no effort is being seriously made to correct the inequities of the international economic system which breed poverty... there can be no lasting peace if these inequities are not addressed.

— Third World Network
Features/IPS

Rajiv Tiwari is a correspondent for Inter Press Service, with whose permission this article is reproduced.

OPINION

marked the Assembly's creation of a humanitarian aid co-ordinator and an arms register to record the trade in conventional weapons.

Third World delegates say the proposals by industrialised countries are loaded with political intent aimed at eroding the sovereignty in their states.

For the West, it was a well-

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