

Dhaka, Sunday, March 22, 1992

A new stage in Bangladesh-US relations

The Khalea-Bush talks held last Friday at the White House marks a new stage in the Bangladesh-US relations. The relations between the two countries, traditionally close, have grown closer still with the establishment of a democratic government in Bangladesh following the fall of Ershad and the holding of a free and fair election.

As press reports go, the first ever meeting between the two leaders seems to have gone off very well. The exchanges have been free and frank and appear to have covered a wide range of issues, both national and international.

For Bangladesh, backing of the US government is important for the success of many of our development projects. The US has been one of the principal sources of foreign assistance and has always been among the first few countries to come to our aid in the time of natural calamities. The Prime Minister was correct in expressing our deep appreciation for the role of the US Task Force in organising the logistics for relief operation during last April's cyclone and for the economic support extended to us. Washington's understanding is also necessary for us in getting the required assistance from the IMF and the World Bank where its influence, always considerable, has now become overriding.

President Bush expressed to our PM the United States' strong commitment to the establishment of democracy here. This reiteration of what we already knew was important in view of the fact that such reiteration will help us to consolidate the process in our country. We are happy to learn about President Bush's commitment for continued economic and food aid to Bangladesh. This commitment is especially welcome in view of the fact that we feared, along with many other developing countries, that the quantum of US assistance will decrease following the break-up of the former Soviet Union and turning of East Europe towards market economy. Given such developments, it was naturally thought that US assistance will travel towards that direction at the expense of the need of countries like Bangladesh. President Bush's assurance, at least, removes that uncertainty.

As for the immediate future, we welcome the US government's clear condemnation of the atrocities carried out by the Myanmar government on the minority Rohingya people. President Bush has also talked about extending full support to the UNHCR's efforts to come to the aid of the Myanmar refugees. While we welcome the statement of support, it is also clear that the United States will have to help Bangladesh in bringing about the necessary diplomatic pressure on the Myanmar government to negotiate a solution to this political and humanitarian problem. As our Prime Minister has repeatedly said that we wish to have a peaceful solution to the Rohingya problem. It is our wish the military government of Myanmar were made to realise the isolated position in which their state policy of oppressing their ethnic minorities have placed them. In this regard, the United States government could assist Bangladesh by impressing upon the government of the ASEAN countries the importance of putting pressure on the Myanmar government to settle this issue. The US can also convey a similar sentiment and concern to the Chinese government, who appear to enjoy considerable influence among the high-ups of the Myanmar military junta, to stop the atrocities and take back the refugees with a guarantee of their democratic rights. As is already known, Bangladesh is interested in a meeting of the Security Council. US support will be critical for such a move to succeed.

We are still to get a detailed report of the discussion between our PM and US President. As we await the details, we feel confident the close relationship between our two countries will be greatly advanced as a result of this visit by Begum Zia to the United States.

Rise in Wife-bashing

From 1988 to 1991, about 16 thousand new brides have been burnt or committed suicide by burning in cases involving non-fulfilment of dowry commitments in India. Dowry Prevention Act is supposed to be in force in that country since 1961. And yet this state of affairs! The Indian government is reportedly going very soon to amend existing laws in a way designed to bring down both dowry payments and such killings.

The problem is not unknown in Bangladesh. More and more brides are being killed all over Bangladesh in violence involving dowry which in effect means far worse than selling a girl. In dowry cases not only girl doesn't have any value at all, she is moreover an interminable acting instrument of extortion and blackmail. It is not only the degradation brought upon the girl by making one agree to take her on payment of cash and kind, it is more importantly the life she enters after a dowry marriage is an outright social crime, a gross violation of human rights and an abject crime against humanity. The lot of the first slaves taken from Africa to the Americas, narrated so well in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, were perhaps somewhat better than that of a dowry wife.

There is, however, a difference between ways of torture in the two countries, depending largely on the difference in taste and tradition. While in Tagore's *Strir Patra* Mrinal burns herself to death, in Bangladesh brides are murdered straightway by the husbands, or the in-laws, or both. It is still fresh in our memory that a pregnant newly married wife, in her attempt to fly from unbearable beating jumped into the house-pond, where her husband and his brothers stoned her into drowning. And there is no end to such stories. And these are growing both in frequency and in cruelty.

The report from India, published in The Daily Star of Thursday, has a very interesting point that should apply in our cases of wife-bashing with equal force, if not more. The report quotes socialists as finding a correspondence between the rise in such murders and the rise of consumerism. The crime of the bride who was stoned to drowning was only that she could not bring in from her impoverished father a cassette-player.

Can law arrest this march of inhumanity? Alone? What can we do in Bangladesh to stop spouse-murder by the hundreds? We must need be approaching the problem more socially than legally. We must find effective ways and means for mobilising society in this cause.

A NEW ECONOMIC POLICY IN OFFING

AL Goes for Privatisation - But Much Work Lies Ahead

WHAT one should welcome most about the draft economic policy of the Awami League (AL), announced on Thursday by party President Sheikh Hasina, is the drive within the organisation towards major rethinking on a number of basic issues facing the country.

As expected, the main focus of the draft policy is on the AL's switch from its commitment to socialism to market economy and on its covert rejection of state ownership in certain sectors of the economy in favour of a mixed system in which an expanding private sector must compete with shrinking public enterprises, on the basis of efficient management.

However, authors of the draft policy, especially Sheikh Hasina, realise that a massive privatisation of the economy does not, by itself, solve the country's problems. The reliance on the private sector in the new context must still be backed by reforms in virtually all the areas, ranging from agriculture and land tenure system to banking and fiscal institutions. Then, again, there is the need for upgrading the infrastructural development in which the state must take a leading role.

This may be one of the rare occasions when the organisation has taken a view of such a wide spectrum, taking full advantage of consultations with representatives of the private sector as well as with some noted economists of the country.

If we commend what, at the moment, looks like an outward looking approach adopted by the AL leadership, especially by Sheikh Hasina, in the formulation of the economic policy for the organisation, it has also been approvingly noted that the whole presentation of the draft economic policy on Thursday and later a candid exchange between the party president and some senior journalists were refreshingly free

from recriminations against ruling parties, past and present. For once — one did not assume that it was a passing phase — the AL leadership was talking in the language of a responsible opposition, an alternative government, that was committed to carrying out wide-ranging reforms.

However, it is quite possible that the accommodating position taken by the AL leadership largely stemmed from its defensive attitude on its departure from its long-held commitment to socialism. One sensed it when, in the very first question after she had just finished reading the text of the draft policy, Sheikh Hasina was asked why her organisation had moved away from socialism. In her reply, the AL President talked about the need to ad-

tion — calls for the setting up of a whole section of experts, much more than whatever help a few advisers can provide from the background.

Herein lies the most important challenge facing AL. On Thursday, Sheikh Hasina presented what can best be described as the basic guidelines of a proposed new economic policy of the organisation. A lot of work remains to be done on each item of the proposed policy. No longer a question of formulating a charter of five-point, seven-point or ten-point demands, the organisation is now obliged to find economic and financial justification for each reform it has proposed in the draft policy. It has to be done with the help of facts and figures, against the

catching easy solutions, with the so-called soft options. The leadership should resist such a temptation. Instead, it should present the country, especially its own rank and file, with a realistic picture of the limits and constraints and talk of hard options. For instance, it is better to propose a new rural credit policy that is designed to help the poorest of the poor than to offer to provide off outstanding agricultural loans. Again, there may be a way of providing new incentives to Bangladeshi workers abroad to remit their earnings through official channels rather than via unofficial HUNDI route.

It will be good for the May Council Meeting of Awami League to debate these questions and thus prepare the rank and file for the challenges facing not just the organisation but also the country as a whole. True, some of the challenges result from either poor performance or failures of successive administrations, including the present one. But other challenges are inherent in the situation, for which no single government can be blamed.

The success of the Council meeting largely depends on the preparation of the AL leadership and indeed, if one can put it without being offensive, on its learning experience on economic issues. In coming months, it should involve itself in more closed door discussions with economic experts and representatives of the private sector, organise some research studies and hold open seminars on problems facing the country. Whether all these moves will help the Awami League to win the next election, we do not know. But they will certainly help in institutionalising the role of the opposition in parliamentary democracy and adding a new dimension to the politics of Bangladesh.

AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

just to the "changes on the global scene," and thus stopped short of admitting that the policy of nationalisation, introduced by the Awami League administration soon after liberation, had failed to work in the way it was expected. Meanwhile, other leaders sitting on the main table, like Abdus Samad Azad and Sajeda Chowdhury, whispered some additional points to their President, which were politely ignored. Here was a proof, if one was needed, that the absence of someone with a background in economics, among the front-ranking leaders, has left a vacuum at the AL's decision-making level. The situation cannot be remedied just by Sheikh Hasina using the advisory services of Prof. Rehman Sobhan. Indeed, the work of reshaping a new economic policy for AL — one that will make or break the organisa-

background of past failures and conflicting options. This also means specific issues must be tackled separately, instead of lumped together under some ambiguous general categorisations.

A few examples can be cited. What kind of policy for land reforms is AL in favour of? What is the organisation's answer to problems faced by the so-called sick industries? How far would the organisation go in the introduction of reforms in the banking sector, without the Bangladesh Bank assuming too big a regulatory role? And, finally, how would an AL-led government, approach the country's relationship with aid agencies and donor nations on the question of conditionalities?

The Awami League may well feel tempted to answer these, and other, questions with vote-

Chiluba Seeks the Light at the End of the Tunnel

by Derek Ingram in London and Victor Zaza and Fred Cela in Lusaka

At the end of his first 100 days as President of Zambia Frederick Chiluba flew to London and Washington to see what help he could get to put his country back on its economic feet. He got a warm welcome and promises of debt relief and other help. But he faces a race with time if he is to keep the confidence of the people who voted him in last October.

N EAT and twinkly Frederick Chiluba is a tiny man with a gigantic task. Somehow he has to put debt-ridden, run-down Zambia back on to the relatively prosperous road it was travelling along in the early days of independence.

Just about everything is against him, not least a \$8 billion foreign debt. Every Zambian, the new President reminds his listeners, owes nearly \$1,000.

One hundred days after ousting President Kenneth Kaunda in multi-party elections he has just made his first foray to London and Washington to see what help he can find to buttress his newly democratic state. Both Prime Minister John Major and President George Bush offered Zambia debt relief and other help.

In London he promised in his first speech that there would be no reneging on commitments "nor any silly pretence of thinking you can simply wash away your debt commitments."

But he added: "Unless the international community helps our cash flow while we exert ourselves to the utmost, a young democracy could easily decompose into social strife and fratricidal feuds."

"People have limitations. You can ask them to die a little for better future prospects, but unless there is some light at the end of the tunnel appeals

FREDERICK CHILUBA
A newly President

to their reason can easily be an exercise in futility."

Chiluba is one of the new breed of African leaders. He has a delightful sense of humour, reminiscent of the style (if not the policies) of former President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, and no hangups about the colonial past.

When he spoke to a packed house at the Commonwealth Trust in London he actually put in a good word for the former British rulers — at the risk, he

said, of being lynched by African radicals who contend that "colonialism must never be eulogised, even most inadvertently."

He said the British had arranged a rather orderly handover in 1964 — "not only did they leave a semblance of administration, but also quite good reserves estimated at \$500-800 million."

If he expects some debt relief, he is quick to say, unusually, that the developed countries "owe us nothing." He adds, however, that "they have a duty to move along with us to ensure new democracies do not crumble." Zambia also desperately needs investment and is now doing all it can to make it attractive.

Democracy, Chiluba points out, is expensive. He is giving Zambia the British system of a "loyal opposition." The successor to Kaunda, who has resigned as leader of the formerly all-powerful United National Independence Party, will get a salary, office, car and other assistance as the official Leader of the Opposition, on the Westminster model. All that, explains Chiluba, costs money.

It is also a concept which post-colonial Africa has till now rejected as too difficult to plant on African soil. Chiluba believes Zambia should try it.

The changes he intends to make in Zambia are radical — delinking political parties from government and making them pay for themselves, putting the copper mines up for sale — Anglo-American Corporation are coming back in — ensuring repatriation of profits, and reforming the parastatals.

He is setting up a trade mission in South Africa. Chiluba is scathing about past Zambian policies of doing business with Pretoria while professing to impose sanctions. He says: "Why go like Nicodemus, at night? We look on South Africa as an unavoidable case."

At a summit in Lusaka of the Preferential Trade Area Authority (PTA) he clashed with Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni on South Africa. Chiluba said countries in the region could no longer afford to sit back and wait. He added: "Their influence is real. Even in the bitterest days of apartheid many of our members were never in a position

to stop trading with South Africa." Museveni said the time had not yet come to trade with Pretoria.

Chiluba's first 100 days have been far from smooth. He had promised a small cabinet, so when he appointed one 25-strong against Kaunda's 18 he came under fire. He promised a free press, but his Minister of Information, the Rev Stan Kristafor, began dictating what should be beamed on the electronic media.

He had to stop demolition of illegal structures in Lusaka which was leaving hundreds homeless.

He had to set up a commission of inquiry into a road accident in which his Vice-President was injured and aide-de-camp killed. And he conceded some parastatal appointments by ministers had been irregular.

Chiluba has, however, taken some startling steps — removing the maize subsidy, abolishing the government pension scheme which fallen leaders including Kaunda were to receive, taking possession of the huge complex put up as UNIP headquarters which he said was built with public funds.

His first budget was seen as well thought out, but the miners were not impressed with tax relief measures. Devaluation of the kwacha by 30 per cent means importers will pay more heavily than ever and pass on the costs to the consumer. Fuel prices have risen by 30 per cent, bus fares by 50 per cent. Beer is up 30 per cent.

On top of all this the prolonged drought which has hit the whole of Southern Africa, will devastate this year's crops, involving heavy imports of food.

As for Kaunda, who bowed out after his election defeat with good grace, he says he has quit politics and will devote his life to the promotion of global peace. The aftermath of his fall has been bitter.

The government-owned newspaper that once championed his cause, reflected: "He will be remembered as a man who didn't know when his time was up. In later years, he was intensely hated by the majority and it was the dangerous kind of hatred where people smile when they see you but insult you behind your back." — GEMINI NEWS

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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.

Rohingyas

Sir, Reports passing from various authentic sources revealed that in Arakan of Burma exploitation, repression, discrimination, atrocities and oppression along with numerous other crimes and injustices in many covert and overt forms, have been carried out for a long time against the Rohingyas (Arakanese Muslims) by the Burmese military regimes in long drawn conspiracy with racist Arakanese Magh authorities.

The anti-Rohingya elements both inside and outside, the government offices in Rangoon and Arakan are determined to fulfil their sinister design of liquidating the Muslims and transforming Arakan, which is the permanent land of the Rohingyas, into a land only of Maghs who have been co-existing for generation in the multi-ethnic area. Arakan is, admittedly, a Muslim majority region which is geographically, historically ethnologically and culturally dominated by Rohingyas since the beginning of the 6th century AD.

Those who have taken and are taking shelter in Bangladesh have woeful tales to tell. It is a genocide, "a total destruction of a nation as a whole". Protection of human rights and fundamental freedom is an issue of considerable concern for the international community. It is a provision of the United Nation charter in clear and unequivocal terms. The problem created by the Burmese government is not only humanitarian but a political one, because it constituted as such violation of human rights

and flagrant denial of elementary liberties, freedom, particularly ethnicity and entity.

A concerted action by the United Nation Security Council the US and other powerful states is required to help these unfortunate human beings (Rohingyas) and ensure their repatriation to their own country.

M Kamal,
Momin Road, Chittagong.

World trade centre

Sir, In press reports earlier we came to learn that a building would be constructed on the corner plot opposite Sheraton Hotel and Sakura market to house the proposed World Trade Centre. No doubt it was a good move. After observing the recently concluded textile exhibition I with some friends have come up with the idea of an alternate site for the proposed centre. The venue of the textile exhibition will be a better site for a trade centre. This may be a permanent site for all exhibitions and seminars related to trade. For better understanding similar centres at Singapore and Seoul may be compared.

This site made available by shifting the old Tejgaon Airport will be spacious and will have plenty of parking space. Movement from all parts of the city will be convenient if any big show is held at this place. On the other hand, even a small gathering at the Minto Road junction will cause inconvenience to the guests at Hotel Sheraton as well as to the VIP inhabitants

of the locality. Parking of visitors' vehicles can cause calamity to the traffic situation on the busy road.

A permanent trade centre with facilities for exhibition space, both indoor and outdoor will be beneficial to local and foreign businessmen who at times would like to exhibit their products and to see what others have to offer. However, the point is already home as a decision to have a trade centre was taken.

The land thus made surplus can be utilized to construct a high-rise apartment block for government functionaries.

MA Haq
West Rajabazar, Dhaka.

Appreciation

Sir, Like many other readers, I read the article 'The Universe within the Universe' written by Ms Shireen Bari with great interest. She has a facile pen and the ability to present a difficult subject with lucidity in a concise form.

My attention has also been drawn by a letter to the Editor entitled 'Author of a famous book'. It has been rightly pointed out that the author of 'Alice in Wonderland' is indeed 'Lewis Carroll' but his real name is Charles Lutwidge Dodgson and the name 'Lewis Carroll' is a pseudonym. In private life he was a lecturer of Mathematics at Oxford.

Ataul Haq
Gulshan, Dhaka

House of Lords

Sir, In the interesting article on the British House of Lords, appearing in Thursday's paper, I had expected mention of the only peer from the Indian sub-continent, Lord Sinha of Raipura. He was also the only Indian to hold a position in the British Cabinet as an Under Secretary. He was also the first Indian Governor of a province, that of Bihar.

Akber Kabir
Korompur, Faridpur.

OPINION

HBFC: Another Side of the Picture

This refers to the commentary by Dr Abu Ahmed published in The Daily Star of 15 February. It is perhaps true that only a quarter of the HBFC loanees pay their instalments regularly, and another quarter does not pay at all. Non-payment of loan amounts has become a regular phenomenon and the only thing the authorities have been doing against defaulters is to encourage them to pay by waiving interests or even part of the principal amounts. Either our law is inadequate or defective to deal with such defaulters or maybe there are weak points for which the authorities are reluctant to go to the court. But, then, what treatment is being received by those who are law-abiding? It appears that the authorities are very particular to see that the 'rules' are applied to the letter and spirit in their cases only. With apology, I would like to give an example of my own case (with figures and dates to facilitate calculation and understanding.)

I was granted a loan of Tk 3,35,000 receivable in five instalments starting from 1-11-84 (loan A/C 17012-General). I received four instalments in time, but I did not receive the last instalment for long ten months (after applying for it), because my file was reportedly missing.

I moved from one table to the other, met officers at different levels, but the 'missing file' could not be traced. Finally, I saw the MD and at his interference, I got a cheque dated 2.2.86 within 3/4 days.

But to my surprise, it was discovered that the final cheque dated 13.6.85 was actually ready more than seven

months, but as the file was missing (?), it could not be delivered. And also because that cheque lost its validity (after 6 months), a new cheque was issued.

But while calculating the lump sum interest (which is usually for the period between the dates of receiving the first and the last instalments plus the period up to the date when repayment starts), they considered 2.2.86 as the date for disbursement of last instalment, and not 13.6.85. As a result, a sum of about Tk 27000/= was over charged as lump interest. I made representations to the MD, the finance secretary and the then finance minister (one after the other), explaining the fact that the delay in receiving the last instalment was not due to my fault in any way, and as such, I may be exempted from payment of this extra amount of interest.

But finally a reply came from the HBFC quoting a resolution of the Board of Directors to the effect that "as per the contract, the HBFC is not responsible for any delay in payment of loan instalments".

What a strange logic! A loanee has to pay the penalty for lapses of the HBFC! I then made an appeal to the President on 10.8.87 which was duly acknowledged from the President's Secretariat, but the only thing they did was to send it to the HBFC for 'disposal as per rule'. I sent a reminder after one year (11-8-88), but that also brought no reply.

I again sent a representation to the principal finance secretary on 30-1-91 (when the interim government was in office). This time, of course, a reply came from the HBFC just

quoting the same old resolution of the Board of Directors, and expressing their inability to do anything.

This is not the end of the story. In their letter dated 8.5.86 I was informed by the HBFC that I have to pay a total lump interest of Tk 44,540/15 for the period between 1-11-84 and 28.2.86. Accordingly, I started repayment while my representation to the authorities continued. In 52 monthly instalments, I made a total repayment of Tk 1,96,049/93, but to my utter surprise, I again detected that HBFC had deducted (from the amount paid) Tk 85,137/21 as lump interest, Tk 44,736/13 as normal interest, Tk 72/23 as penal interest and only Tk 66,104/36 as the principal amount.

I saw one of the officers of the HBFC with a written representation. He was kind enough to go through all the records, and allowed a refund of Tk 27,553/= thus making lump interest Tk 57,584/= but the date for starting repayment was pushed back by one month. That is, the amount of lump interest was recalculated at Tk 57,584/= and date for starting repayment at 1-5-86 (instead of Tk 44,540/15 and 1-4-86 respectively as communicated to me through their letter dated 8-5-86).

The question is what did I gain by being regular and law-abiding? Maybe that I have been unwise, and possibly should have joined the so-called 'welfare association' of the defaulters.

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