

The Chinese Dilemma

If there is a single important element that emerged from the opening address of Prime Minister Li Peng at the annual National People's Congress during last weekend, it is the Chinese leader's balancing act among three, if not more, conflicting compulsions. In order of priority, they reflect Beijing's determination to maintain the status quo, in leadership as well as in broad policies; well-measured economic liberalisation, based on what Mr Li called, "a bolder approach"; and a recognition, but not an acceptance, of international pressure on the question of human rights, otherwise known as pro-democracy movement, inside the world's most populous country.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Mr Li talked about the "emancipation of mind" while arguing against the adoption of "any ideological trend towards bourgeois liberalisation". Then, while making a vigorous plea for more innovative market-oriented economic reforms, he stopped short of offering any dramatic concessions to the liberal school which has been in favour of more capitalism than permitted by the present leadership to release the latent energy of the growing private sector. Finally, by paying his tributes to the teachings of both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, Mr Li managed to maintain his own personal middle position between the liberals and hard-liners in the country's continuing ideological battle which recently threatened to bring about a change in the top leadership.

It is still early to say how the deliberation at the National Congress will affect the course of behind-the-scenes power struggle. However, it seems that for the time being, Mr Li has side-stepped, if not resolved, the dilemma facing China. Since the country's economic reforms continue to pay off, unlike those introduced in the former Soviet Union or in its new tottering republics, the political pressure on human rights, at home and abroad, has certainly eased. Unfortunately, the country's declining position in international affairs and the adverse criticisms Beijing has evoked, even among its allies, by its massive sale of arms to Myanmar, do not seem to figure prominently in the thinking of China's opinion-makers. In this sense, Beijing has become a somewhat inward-looking power, more concerned about its own economic progress and survival of its political system than with taking any significant initiatives in world affairs.

At this moment, it is the attitude of Washington towards Beijing, which is positive especially where President Bush is concerned, that encourages Mr Li to continue with his balancing act. The fact that the country can embark on one market-oriented venture after another, without making any major political concessions to ardent supporters of democracy, has defused the tension between China and the West, even if it has not actually impressed some analysts in the United States. Again, in enjoying a massive \$12.69 billion trade surplus with the United States, a surplus figure surpassed only by Japan, China knows the danger of going back into any form of isolation, prompted by a hardline approach in internal politics. In these circumstances, it is safe to assume that Beijing will continue with its present policies perhaps for years, without doing anything drastic, one way or another, in political reforms or in economic liberalisation.

Two Welcome Decisions

The government has decided to celebrate the birthdays of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam on the state level. On each of the occasions a three-day culturefest would be held. The Tagore festival would quite fittingly be held at Shahjapur, where the Tagore Estate had a 'Kuthibari', a regular haunt of Rabindranath in his decade of self-exile into the waters of Eastern Bengal closely before and after he was thirsty. The Nazrul celebration this year will be held at Comilla — the district headquarters of where the great man conducted his first meteoric affair and contracted the first marriage of his colourful life of an incorrigible romantic and an uncompromising rebel and non-conformist. That way the selection of Comilla has of course a sentimental value. But much more than that, it is gratifying to note that the government is aware of the need of taking these celebrations and festivals into the interior rather than holding everything in Dhaka.

We cannot help remembering two things on the happy occasion of these welcome decisions. On the next or the B.S 1399 Raash or Shrabani Purnima, the Manipuri community of Bhanugachh of Sylhet will celebrate the 150th anniversary of holding this dance festival continuing without let-up for as many years. Government would do well to recognise and appreciate the occasion in a manner that would well behave it.

And in 1400 B.S. many a nation, possibly UNESCO itself, will hold special festivals to celebrates Tagore's immortal poem of the same name as the year contains Tagore's musings on if he would at all endure that long. As Rabindranath is far more a poet of the Bengali mind comprehending the human question and universal verities rather than any Indian phenomenon par se, Bangladesh, particularly its government, would be very rightly expected to turn in the best of all performances. For that we suggest well in advance the idea of holding an international conference on Tagoreana — as Tagorology has already been accepted and is in goodly circulation.

In taking the present two decisions the government is apparently following in the footsteps of H.M. Ershad. But let us hope not wholly. Ershad accepted suggestions from the bureaucrats and went all out for their success — very plainly to sell his universally hated autocracy. This is not true of the intentions of the present government. But this is only an expectation that can naturally be made of a democratically elected government. Let this be fulfilled.

"LEARN Bengali or be Sacked!" — screamed a four-column banner headline on the front page of a London tabloid a few weeks ago. Other major dailies also carried the item, although in a less dramatic fashion, as did most ethnic language papers including the Bengali weeklies. The story was about a row that broke at the Knowles First School and Nursery in Bletchley, Buckinghamshire, where three women staff were told by the local education authorities that they must lose their jobs because they had refused to learn Bengali. The staff at this school had been instructed to take lessons in the ethnic language in order to improve relations between teachers and Asian pupils. A quarter of the two hundred and sixty pupils at this school are Asians. But when three classroom assistants declined to go on the part-time course, lasting all thirty-six weeks of the school-year, they were informed that they stood to lose their jobs unless they complied with the condition of a recent education scheme formulated by the Government.

This case is another instance of Conservative or Tory Government's efforts to assure the ethnic Asian communities in Britain that their specific rights are being given due recognition and that the importance of their role in the socio-economic structure of the country is being acknowledged. The scheme in question provides a grant of four million (forty lakhs) pounds nationally, which authorities around the country can spend to help teachers and pupils in various ways. The money actually comes from the Home Office and the Tory-run Council of Buckinghamshire county is trying to spend its share of the grant for providing language training to the staff at local schools.

The three ladies facing the "sack" have all given their own reasons for refusing to learn Bengali. All three argue that they have nothing against the scheme as such, and that they are not making their stand for racist reasons at all. They claim that they have always got on well with the parents and the kids, but Bengali is supposed to be a difficult language to learn and in their view it would be a waste of energy and time to try to master it in a matter of weeks. Local Council authorities, however, are not satisfied by this argument. A council spokesman said, new Home Office guidelines meant that teaching-staff in schools with large numbers of immigrant pupils must learn the children's native languages. If

Education in Britain: What's on for Ethnic Communities?

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education authorities failed to meet this requirement, they could lose Government funding which pays for seventy per cent of the cost of employing classroom assistants. On the other hand, the Home Office accused the Council of misinterpreting the conditions accompanying the grants. These conditions, claim the Home

got to have people who speak the ethnic language. But he does not agree that all the assistants should be made to learn Bengali and feels that they should be allowed their own choice in the matter.

Muslim Schools

In an announcement made last month, the British

mand for extra places in the locality. The measure appears to be no more than a minor bureaucratic reform, but its implications are widespread as it may open up the dispute whether the State should sponsor Muslim schools.

There are, as of now, 4936 Anglican, 2245 Roman Catholic, 31 Methodist and 22 Jewish voluntary-aided schools in Britain, all of which qualify for the Government's proposed policy designed to inject new life into religious education, encouraging voluntary-aided schools to grow at a time when the State-sector as a whole is shrinking. Between these schools account for 27.5 per cent of all State-funded schools and 20 per cent of all pupils in the State-sector. However, there are still no voluntary-aided Muslim schools because — as per the official explanation — private Islamic schools started applying for State backing only in the 'eighties' when the overriding priority was the need to reduce surplus places, and so they missed their chance. The

advocates of Muslim schools are not satisfied by this explanation. The Muslim Educational Trust — an independent body which supports the country's twenty-three private Islamic schools — feels that Muslims are being denied the choice open to other communities and does not hesitate to dub the Government's policy as stark discrimination.

Different Angle

At the same time, some Muslims prefer to view the whole debate from a different angle. The Muslim members of an organisation named Women Against Fundamentalism, for example, think that segregation into different religious groups prevents communal and racial harmony. They would welcome a clean break between religion and the State, with the withdrawal of all public funding of religious schools. There remains, however, a lurking suspicion in the minds of the Muslims in Britain that their community is perhaps not really wanted as an integral part of the mainstream of British life. They want their children to be both good British citizens and good Muslims. They want their offspring to learn the full National Curriculum as well as the Islamic Faith. They are in this country permanently, their future belongs here. So why should they continue to be the victims of an insensitive discrepancy?

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Letter from London Sagar Chaudhury

Office, are certainly not dictatorial, they simply mean that recipients of these grants must spend the money on helping the ethnic minorities to improve their language skills and to set up their own businesses. However, the local Tory MP — who has joined a campaign to get the dismissed ladies reinstated at the school — has accused the Home Office of a degree of insensitivity. He admits that the standards of people who do not speak English are to be raised, the schools have

Education Secretary Mr Kenneth Clarke spoke of changes to the rules governing state-funding for religious schools. He said that popular schools should be able to expand, even if they are within local authority areas suffering from an overall surplus of places. As voluntary-aided religious schools are among the most popular, this marks a shift away from present regulations which prevent them from increasing pupil numbers unless there is a general de-

ONE of the most severe droughts to hit Southern Africa this century is threatening an economic disaster for the region.

The sporadic rain that has fallen on the traditional bread baskets of South Africa and Zimbabwe was too little, too late. Floods in some areas of Angola and Namibia were too much for the hardened ground and merely washed crops away.

"It looks as though the 12 plagues of Egypt and a few more are queuing to ravage agriculture," said South African Agriculture Minister Kraal van Niekerk.

Every one of the continent's southern mainland countries is affected.

"The other Sunday, it rained in Harare," recalls Robin Palmer of OXFAM.

"Normally you don't even notice it by this time of the year, but this rainfall was the first in months, and it just smelt different — like the first of the season."

The United Nations World Food Programme estimates that more than six million tonnes of cereal is needed to cover the shortfall in this April's harvest, but such dryness will probably not mean widespread famine.

Palmer, OXFAM regional manager for the area, predicts the drought will hurt the economies of the region more than anything else.

"On the whole, people don't die from lack of food in southern Africa," he says.

"It's not like in the Horn (in Somalia and Ethiopia). You don't see people leaving their villages en masse, searching for food. In most places, there's enough food to carry over for the next few months, and it's after that we have to worry about."

Drought is not uncommon

Drought Threatens Economies and Politics of Southern Africa

Mark Richardson and Francis Mwanza writes from London and Rome respectively

A drought that is being called the worst of the century is devastating crops across Southern Africa. For the first time in memory, none of the area's countries is able to export grain to help its neighbours and food must be brought in from abroad. The drought is catastrophic but it threatens economies and politics more than nutrition.

In some of the affected areas. What is unusual is that such a vast area is involved, and that countries cannot just truck their surplus crops cheaply to the regions that need them.

This year, says Palmer, yellow maize — not generally liked in Southern Africa — will probably be brought in from the United States to supply the shortfalls.

The question for the moment is who will pay.

South Africa, facing the greatest overall shortage of up to three million tonnes of cereal, is the only country with enough foreign exchange to afford the unanticipated imports. Most affected governments have asked for relief in paying for the unexpected imports.

Zambia's new president, Frederick Chiluba, says \$200 million will be needed to pay for his country's additional imported cereals.

Britain announced on March 4 that it will divide a donation of £5 million between Zambia and Zimbabwe to be put towards buying food. It will also send 10,000 tonnes of food to Mozambique and 5,000 tonnes to Mozambican refu-

gees in Malawi, the two areas most threatened by possible famine.

This was one of the first direct offers of help, and far sort of what the United Nations estimates will be needed.

The UN World Food Programme predicts Mozambique will need more than a million tonnes of imported cereal to make up the shortfall in its harvest. Zimbabwe will also need a similar amount and Zambia will be short by half-a-million tonnes.

Only Malawi might produce enough to feed its own population, although not enough for the refugees it is sheltering.

Some southern African countries face more than just an economic crisis. Zambia, Lesotho, Angola and Mozambique are struggling with the various stages of converting to multi-party democracy.

"There is an underlying concern for the politics of the region," says Matthew Sherrington of OXFAM. "Something like a drought could really undermine the positive things that are going on."

"Western governments should keep an eye on Sou-

thern Africa, because a drought is the last thing they need at the moment."

The extent of the dryness is still uncertain. Aid agencies are assessing the needs of each country.

In South Africa and Zambia, some crops are thriving in areas where rain has fallen normally. The concern, especially in South Africa, is for the farms that grow staple crops in arid regions with little diversification of produce.

The Development Bank of South Africa estimates that as many as 3,000 highly-indebted white farmers will be forced to leave their land. They would layoff 100,000 black workers who, in turn, could not provide for a million dependents.

"It's not happening at the moment. We haven't heard of

people being evicted because of the drought," says Sherrington, "but it's those people that we're most concerned for. Once they've left the land, they have no rights to allow them back."

Even if the rains come now, much damage has already been done to the crops and the rain will only hasten the rotting of the shrivelled produce. Future rains are as difficult to predict as the drought itself. The cause of this season's dryness is still not known, although the warm El Nino ocean current is at least partly responsible.

El Nino flows every few years between Latin America and Southern Africa, and the exchange of energy between its warm water and the atmosphere always causes abnormal weather.

The current was associated with droughts in its last two occurrences, in 1983 and 1987, but the severity of this year's aridity suggests El Nino is only a part of the cause.

"The question is if we're now going into a long-term climatic change, maybe due to deforestation and other man-made differences," says Palmer.

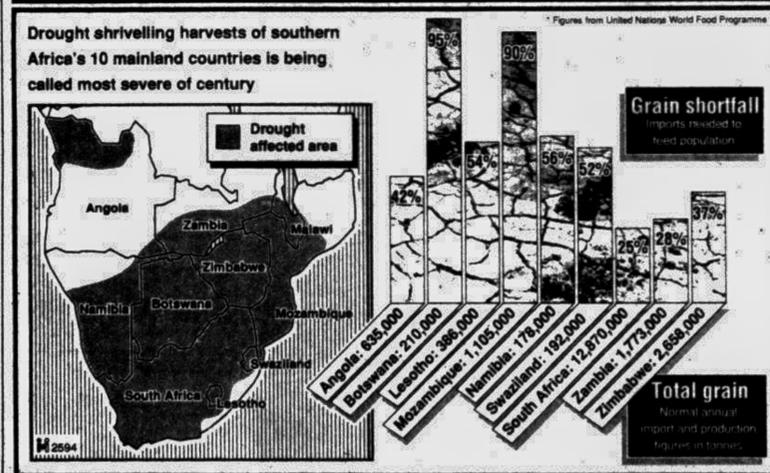
"If this drought is just the first of others like it, then southern Africa's got to rethink everything."

In ironic contrast, the traditionally dry Sahelian countries of Western Africa are recording record harvests, reaching a total of 8.7 million tonnes, a third better than last year's output and almost double the output of the 1984 drought season.

New production records were set in four of the five main producing countries of the area. Compared to 1990, production increased by 25 per cent in Mali, nearly 50 per cent in Burkina Faso and Chad, and by two-thirds in Niger.

— GEMINI NEWS is a Canadian Journalist working with Gemini News Service on a fellowship financed by Canada's International Development Research Centre. FRANCIS MWANZA is a Zambian journalist, working in Rome as an information officer with the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization.

Where drought is striking



To the Editor...

Processions

Sir, I do not deny the right of the people to assemble and express their discontentment and problems. But you must admit that these constant processions do create a lot of hassle as regards daily transportation.

There are routine road blocks because of the processions and it makes life difficult when you are trying to get to a place in time to keep an appointment.

If we have got rid of autocracy why do we need these constant signs of unrest in the city? Why is it necessary to block roads to draw attention to the demands of the people? The loud cries that accompany these processions also

disturb the relative calm of the day. It startles you as you are sitting and working in offices and jars your nerves if you happen to be passing by.

There is hardly a day there is not a meeting before Press Club or Baitul Mukarram.

With the hurrying buses, lorries and cramping rickshaws, the heat becomes even more unbearable when we must face traffic jams due to the processions.

GDH Barani, Dhaka

The sanctity of fasting

Sir, The write-up 'The Abstemious Busybody' (Dhaka Day by Day, March 21) would

not have been necessary if the non-A writer had adopted the stratagem of not partaking of any refreshment in the office. I do not smoke or eat in the office or anywhere outside my house when I am not fasting. It solves all the problems mentioned in the column, simply because it does not create any.

As to 'mind-your-own-business' syndrome, it affliction is possible in the Western society, which is like-minded. Why do we expect same quality in others prematurely? It is not fair. 'When in Rome, do what the Romans do'. For example, a young lady dare to go out in shorts for shopping in Dhaka.

N/A Nobody Dhaka

OPINION

Biman: Domestic Fare Hike

On 27th November 1991 a very depressing news about Biman was published by The Daily Star that its annual loss in the 'domestic sector' was Tk 13 crores. There was no mention whether it was Operating Loss or Net Loss. On this plea Biman gave a feeble that the domestic fare could be increased substantially, if not twice as much. However, on February 12, 1992 an encouraging news was published by the same newspaper that Biman made Tk 8.3 crores profit in the first quarter of fiscal year 1991-92. In this case also we remained in doubt. Was it Operating Profit or Net Profit? Any way it was understandable that the overall profit of Tk 8.3 crores has absorbed the first quarter's loss in the so-called domestic sector. Therefore, the domestic travellers should not have any fear 'fare hike' in Biman's so-called domestic sector.

However, the assumption that domestic sector has been operating in loss may not be the whole truth, and the logic that the so-called international sector subsidises the domestic sectors does not appear to be tenable. Because some of the international and regional sectors may also be operating in loss. In fact, reportedly, some of these sectors are not generating even the lowest expected income (yield) inspite of reasonable Passenger Load Factor of 67.4%. This situation may, however, change after Yield Management System is introduced because it may plug almost all the holes.

The assumption that domestic sector is subsidised by the international sector, needs certain clarifications because it appears that the real situation is somewhat different. Civil Aviation Authority's statistics show that in 1989 calendar year 55,754 international passengers embarked and disembarked at Chittagong, and 52,350 at Sylhet. These 1,08,104 passengers, minus those who travelled by Indian Airlines between Chitta-

bang and Calcutta, with their accompanied excess baggage and freight while coming home paid a substantial amount of money in foreign exchange and in local currency while leaving Bangladesh. Since the income is international income, generated by international passengers, it is logical that all expenditures incurred to fly them to any place, as per their ticket, must also be considered as international expenditure irrespective of the type of aircraft they fly in. Expenditures incurred for them within Bangladesh must not be considered as domestic expenditures irrespective of their 'transfer' to another aircraft at Z.I.A.

It appears to be a contradiction to say that the 'ethnic' passengers of Sylhet and Chittagong are causing 'loss' to Biman in the domestic sector while contributing a great deal to make 'profits' in the international sectors. Considering the above point it is necessary to re-calculate Biman's income and expenditure against 'international passengers' and 'domestic passengers' instead of international and Domestic 'sectors'. At the same time Biman should prepare 2 Balance Sheets and 2 Profit and Loss Accounts, one 'international operation' and another for 'domestic operation'. In fact, by making a statement that domestic sector is operating in loss, Biman in under self-imposed obligation to prepare separate Balance Sheets to justify the statement.

The 1990 Statistical Yearbook show that Biman had never carried any international passengers within Bangladesh though nearly 25% of the total number of passengers carried by Biman in F-28 & F-27s within Bangladesh during 1988-89 were international passengers of Sylhet and Chittagong. When the Civil Aviation Authority (under the same Ministry as Biman is), the National Board of Revenue,

Bangladesh Bank, Custom, Emigration and other agencies have records of international passengers embarking and disembarking at Chittagong and Sylhet, how it is possible that the Bureau of Statistics and Biman give a completely different picture? The readers should not be surprised to learn that such incorrect statistics, which have created incorrect impression among the planners, have influenced the preparation of successive 5-Year Plans of Bangladesh!

In view of the foregoing I wish to suggest that (i) Biman and Civil Aviation Authority should maintain statistics in harmony with each other, (ii) Both should maintain statistics in terms of Financial Year instead of one in Financial Year and another in Calendar Year, (iii) Biman should prepare separate Balance Sheets and Profit & Loss Accounts as well as Annual Budgets after separating the Assets and Liabilities, and proportionate costs of Head Office and Station Overheads, Aircraft Maintenance, Landing and Overlying charges (or Air Navigation charges), Sales and Service, Fuel, Crew cost and Salary & Allowances for other than the Crew. (iv) Similarly, distribution of Revenue Earnings should be shown against Passengers, Excess Baggage, Cargo, Mail and others. (v) Increase of fare for the so-called domestic passengers should be kept in abeyance till Biman produces a comprehensive Annual Report with Two audited Balance Sheets and Profit & Loss accounts (one for international operation and another for domestic operation), and submits to the Government.

I do not claim to be 100% correct in respect of the statistics quoted above and the concept that I have projected but I do deserve to be corrected if there is anything incorrect.

Mohammad Torab Ali Jhika Tala, Dhaka