

Aid to Russia

The West is going ahead with the move that many may think overdue to provide an aid package of \$24 billion to Russia alone to bolster the economy of the largest republic of the former Soviet Union, and, to that extent, to strengthen the position of President Boris Yeltsin. The announcement made last week represents the largest financial commitment offered to Moscow by the West so far, a commitment in which the United States would contribute a fifth to a quarter. As expected, the disbursement of the aid package will cover next three to five years, implemented by several aid agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Meanwhile, the stage is set for Russia to secure an additional credit line of \$4 billion from the IMF to help with the balance of payment of the republic.

While no one should express any reservations about this massive aid committed by the West to just one republic of the old Soviet Union, some delicate questions cannot just be brushed aside. There are other republics in the newly-formed Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) which also desperately need international assistance. Being much smaller in size than Russia, their need is unlikely to be as large as that of Moscow. Then, there are three independent Baltic states which also deserve help. Unfortunately, these CIS republics or the Baltic states have not produced a politician with the clout of Yeltsin. Some of these republics are, therefore, obliged to lean on Muslim countries like Iran and Pakistan, while others are developing close ties with China. It is too early to say that, in the process, some Muslim members of CIS will gradually turn to Islamic fundamentalism, while a few might embrace the Chinese-style economic reforms in preference to western-type market mechanism.

In these circumstances, it might have been wiser for the West and the international aid agencies to deal with the overall situation in some totality than to separate the case of Russia from others and treat it in a special category.

Many would also argue that if the western aid of the same size had come when Mikhail Gorbachev had been in power, the former Soviet President might have just survived and the people of the former Soviet Union would have been spared much of the hardship that they face during the winter. Some may even say that the delay underlined a calculated western move to hasten the break-up of the Soviet Union and the fall of Mr Gorbachev.

The official western reason given for the delay was that Mr Gorbachev had so far failed to put in place the necessary infrastructure that could absorb a massive dose of western aid. Is such an infrastructure in place now? Has President Yeltsin succeeded in doing in a matter of months what Mr Gorbachev apparently failed to do in years?

Since, for all practical purposes, Russia has joined the rank of aid-receiving developing countries, the Yeltsin administration should be subjected to all the much-talked about conditionalities which go with the assistance programmes to Third World countries, like Bangladesh, ranging from the abolition of import restrictions to the withdrawal of all subsidies, from devaluation of local currency to the publication of list of loan defaulters by the Norodny Bank. We will be watching.

The Sadhanpur Beacon

The mid-Chaitra heat spell may not in the end prove a harmless routine matter. It may, as a national daily has put out in an alarmist but rather vague prognosis of the months to come, be the beginning of a horrifying drought, specially in the northern region. Even without such a visitation, Bangladesh is finding it real hard to catch up with its problems, not to speak of overcoming them. It is generally agreed that most of these are generated by social mismanagement arising out of a post-colonial situation of socio-economic imbalance ending up in an all-pervasive loot — by a handful at the cost of social decline.

Press reports say as many as 5,000 Bangladesh doctors are unemployed. This is an annoying piece of news for many an intelligent reader. How can a doctor be unemployed? A news report has come up with quite a retort to this made by the young and 'unemployed' doctors. A lakh of paramedics created by the whims of a past topman, joined in by some millions of quacks have driven the graduate physicians out of practising their knowledge and skill, say these angry — and at times perhaps even hungry — doctors. What they have failed to point out is the rural people's incapacity to procure the services of an MBBS doctor. The angry doctors have, however, drawn our attention to the dangerous development of the whole nation becoming immune to anti-biotic treatment — thanks to the quacks.

The junior doctor working for a city 'clinic' is decidedly worse placed than doctors having neither job nor practice. For he or she is exploited to the last drop of strength and endurance — and in exchange is given a pittance. Let us leave these morose thoughts and go to where life still really is. The admission hallaballo. The milling thousands of young boys and girls present the liveliest scene in the whole of the country. But this is only externally so. They are nervous to their guts. This admission system has, by one fell stroke, cut both ways. Robbed the board examinations of whatever significance they had and then made the academic fate of the young students entirely dependent on the coaching centre business and the teacher-coaches with the magic touch. The whole society has been reduced to an exercise in anti-education.

Crimes are on the increase. We come across so many shocking reports everyday as has been exemplified by the gang loot of a jewellery shop in the city last week. We recall them not for bitterness's sake but so that we can come to grips with them.

In far off Sadhanpur, in Puthia upazila of Rajshahi, Mr. Abdul Majid is building a wonderful treatment and rehabilitation centre for handicapped children. Entirely through private means. Nobody in that village or anywhere around laughs at a lame boy's attempt at walking. A silent revolution of the mind is being wrought. Society must live and man must overcome. This is a real way to come to grips with our unpleasant realities. Let his example be a beacon light for us all.

The Narrow World of a British General Election

Derek Ingram writes from London

The general election campaign in Britain is concentrated entirely on domestic matters. Income tax, health, education, unemployment are at the centre of every debate. Last time the British voted, in 1987, it was in a world that had a Berlin Wall, a Soviet Union and an apartheid South Africa. Yet, reports Gemini News Service, the great issues of foreign policy are barely mentioned, let alone discussed.

In vain do British voters search their newspapers and tune in to seamless hours of radio and TV election programmes to find out what policies the parties are proposing to follow in the world beyond Europe.

After five years in which the political map of the world has been turned upside down, no debate is taking place about future British foreign policy or on such key matters as overseas aid, the development of post-Cold War Africa, or even the Middle East where so recently Britain was a major player in a large-scale, if brief, war.

In the past the parties have fought like wildcats over defence. Today the only argument is about whether to build a fourth nuclear submarine. The Labour Party no longer proposes that Britain should abandon its nuclear deterrent, so no one is bothering to focus on the global problem of proliferation.

Yet these matters are not ignored in the party policy statements. They contain several quite important proposals. For instance, the Labour Party is to raise the priority of human rights. It is to set up a human rights division in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and a minister of state will be given special responsibility for human rights.

Every British mission in every country will have to designate an officer whose duties will include monitoring human rights.

In July Britain becomes president of the European Community (EC) for six months and Labour intends to use this term to strengthen the role of EC foreign ministers in monitoring human rights worldwide. It also wants the human rights machinery of the United Nations to be strengthened.

The Tories make the most of their high profile in foreign affairs. They can boast one of

the most able teams in recent years with John Major as Prime Minister and Douglas Hurd as Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary.

The two work together with professionalism and a diplomatic style that is in deep contrast with the abrasive, confrontational manner of Margaret Thatcher that preceded it.

Labour has much less to offer. As opposition leader Neil Kinnock has not had the chance to make much impact internationally and his shadow foreign secretary, Gerald

Kaufman, is little known and does not show great promise.

He is a capable man lacking charisma. In the election campaign Labour has kept him virtually under traps. A Kinnock-Kaufman team just does not seem to hold a candle to Major-Hurd.

The Tory manifesto opens magisterially with two pages on Britain's place in the world. It echoes Margaret Thatcher by claiming that under the party Britain "has regained her rightful place in the world," adding: "We have stood up for the values our country has

always represented. The respect with which Britain is regarded in the world has rarely been higher."

It points out that Britain is a member of the European Community, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the Commonwealth and Group of Seven leading industrial countries (G-7), and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. No other country, it correctly says, holds all these positions.

The Tories deal in specifics. They will support UN peace-keeping, Commonwealth elec-

tion monitoring, use aid to promote good government, and promote the English language by strengthening the British Council and the BBC World Service.

Labour's manifesto is uncannily similar on some of these points, though its three-page foreign policy section is not the first chapter, but the last. Labour will sign the Social Chapter of the European Manaricht Treaty, from which the Tories opted out. This lays down working conditions for all European citizens.

Labour will stop arms sales to countries which might use them for internal repression or international aggression; "end Tory government meddling in the valuable work of the British Council; put women at the heart of the aid programme; take Britain back into Unesco; and join the Commonwealth Foreign Ministers Committee on Southern Africa which the Tories boycotted.

Both parties pay more attention to the Commonwealth than in previous general elections — Labour promises more activity as a member and accuses the Tories of having regarded it as a "wearisome obligation."

Both parties make specific promises to help negotiated settlements to reunify Cyprus and to solve the Kashmir problem — perhaps with an eye to the Cypriot and South Asian voters in Britain.

The Liberal Democrats devote nearly all their attention to the European Community and pay little to the wider world. They generalise about making the UN more effective,

reforming world trading systems, eradicating poverty, famine and disease.

They will end "the commercialisation of aid" and ban arms sales to those violating human rights. Nearly everything would be done within the machinery of the European Community. In the Liberal Democrat manifesto the Commonwealth does not rate a single mention.

Even though Labour is not giving the voters a chance to debate the issues in the campaign, Labour is paying more attention than the other parties to aid and development and sets out its ideas in a separate booklet.

It plans to detach the aid arm of the government, the Overseas Development Administration, from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and call it the Department of International Development, with a cabinet minister representing it.

The Ministry of Overseas Development, as it was once called, has been shunted about through the years. For part of the time Labour was in power it had a minister sitting in Cabinet, the late Judith Hart. Today it is part of the Foreign Office under a Minister of State, Lynda Chalker.

Labour says, together with the other parties, that it will increase aid to meet the UN target of 0.7 per cent of GNP. Labour promises to do this within five years.

But this is a song each ruling party has sung in its manifesto for years. The Tories say it again now, but adding "we cannot set a timetable." Since 1979 their government has moved steadily in the opposite direction, with this year's figure down to only 0.27 per cent — the lowest ever. Labour promises to reach the target in five years.

Development organisations will believe it when it happens.

DEREK INGRAM is editor of Gemini News Service.



Manifestos lay out the party wares

NEW YORK — For the rest of this century, the global march of democratisation seems unstoppable. Now is the time to assess human experience with this form of governance to clearly learn from examples like that of the United States.

The reason for democracy's success in North America, Western Europe and most other members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is that it has produced a demonstrable bettering of the lives of average citizens in these countries — economically, socially and politically. Another important reason concerns the increasing complexity of industrial societies and, through their technological virtuosity, the forces they have unleashed now globalising production, finance, and employment, as well as arms trafficking, global pollution and patterns of media-driven mass consumption and cultural styles.

Such complex, interlinked societies then accelerate these global processes of change by their interactions and have led to many of the momentous geopolitical realignments and internal restructuring of the nations of the world over the past few years.

Democracy simply became more of a necessity as decision-makers at all levels human societies were overwhelmed by proliferating complexities — and as their rigid, top-down hierarchies, designed for simpler times, crumbled, became erratic and lost credibility.

Yet today, the new danger is in simply equating democracy with other forms of decentralisation, privatisation and markets, as well as widening confusion between the proper roles of the two different signals to governments and busi-

nesses — votes and prices, the key feedbacks to correct erroneous decisions and forestall social learning.

Instinctively, politicians, macro-economic planners, local administrators, as well as the executives of vast multinational corporations, have all sought to push decisions off their information-overloaded backs and down the old chains of command — closer to the people. This healthy instinct, whether expressed by Gorbachev's perestroika, privatisation and glasnost, or by IBM chief John Akers with his recent restructuring of that company's top-heavy bureaucracy, simply underscores this crying need for feedback (that is, any complex system's need for a reciprocal flow of information from those affected at the bottom by the decisions taken at the top).

Both votes and prices are important feedbacks to allow a system to self-organise, relieving hurried bureaucrats from vain efforts to plan, coordinate and administer prices, production and distribution without sufficient information.

As systems theorists know, the more complex a system, the more feedback 'loops' are required, covering more aspects of the system. Living systems (such as cities, corporations, nations, government ministries and the United Nations) are the most complex of all. Thus it has been a triumph of common sense that so many politicians, regardless of ideology and tradition, began moving toward democratisation, amplified by freeing mass media to help guide their inevitable re-structuring.

Naturally, they looked to the United States with its long experience with both elections

The United States is being looked at for guidance by countries now taking steps on the road to democracy. But, as international analyst Hazel Henderson notes, while Washington may now lead the world as never before, the symptoms of economic and political decline are also more evident.

and unrestrained process, as a model of democratic, privately driven self-organising processes.

Ironically, it is in the United States itself that this search for the will of the people to guide social change has atrophied more than in almost any other democracy.

Thus, the United States might best be examined by would-be emulators for its failures. Luckily, all societies can learn from its more than two-hundred-year-old experiment institutionalising these two vital forms of popular feedback, which its founders hoped would allow the people to help guide their political leaders and business owners and managers.

Today, as has been amply demonstrated by the public opinion research of the US talk issues surveys conducted on all major aspects of national policy and global security issues, the US public is 'ahead' of its leaders. Yet, as these bipartisan surveys show, neither politicians nor media pundits take these scientifically impeccable results as valid feedback suggesting new policy directions.

While Marxian critiques explaining this disenfranchisement of US voter on unbridled market forces are familiar, those of that earlier analyst of the budding US democracy,

Alexis de Tocqueville, are even more notable.

Tocqueville predicted that, inevitably, the votes of ordinary citizens (most of whom would become employees of manufacturers) would count for less and less as the new nation's economic power grew and created a new 'aristocracy of manufacturers.'

Tocqueville's accurate prediction is the real lesson of today's US democratic failure: market forces make good servants but bad masters.

Today, US democracy is in crisis even though large numbers of citizens and mass media editors are in psychological denial, unable to face up to the facts. By the old money-denominated scorecards of progress (gross domestic product, the stock markets, interest rates, investment, etc), we were told that the 1980's were a soaring success.

But by such broader measures of overall quality of life as my own country futures indicators (CFI) and the United Nations development program's human development index (HDI), the decline of the United States is evident across most dimensions, from literacy to infant mortality, from energy inefficiency to mal-distribution of incomes and wealth, homelessness, even malnutrition and poverty — prevalent

among almost one quarter of US children.

This decay and decline is related to the failure of US democracy. The United States is 24th and last among all the world's democracies in percentages of eligible voters participation in elections. President George Bush was elected by only 27 per cent of the eligible electorate. Obsolete registration requirements disenfranchise millions of voters and the archaic electoral college can over-ride a popular majority voting for a president even today — as happened in 1876 when Republican Rutherford Hayes was made president over Democratic candidate Samuel Tilden, who polled a quarter of a million more votes.

To re-franchise ordinary voters in the United States requires many obvious re-forms: to limit the power of moneyed special interests in funding campaigns of politicians and in the relentless daily lobbying pressure and power to influence mass media. No wonder so few US citizens bother to vote and that they vent their wrath by trying to limit the terms of politicians they no

OPINION

Whither Reason? Whither Truth?

Shahabuddin Mahtab

ALL the religious, political and social philosophers emphatically agree that reason and reason alone should be our guide post. Sir Winston Churchill stated, "the true guide in life is to do what is right". Mahatma Gandhi tried to attain truth in his book 'autobiography or the application of truth'. Let truth come in our life with all its beauty and all its fury. Emile Zola in 'J'accuse' says, "if you shut up truth and bury it under the ground it will but grow, and gather to itself such explosive power that the day it bursts, it will blow up everything in its way".

A millionaire relation of mine who started his career in the early seventies as a young man with only a few thousand takas, earned his first million in just about five years. From that point on, his rise was in the fast lane. The son of a friend of mine who passed his BA with great difficulty two decades ago and thereafter shared a room with three other people in the Motijheel Area, often used to come to me for short term loans, twenty years ago. He is now rolling in money. They are the success stories in our present society. Both these gentlemen told me that truth, reason, honesty and integrity are all out of date. One has to make hay while the sun shines.

In comparison to the above gentlemen a friend of mine, who had seen sixty springs and held the top positions in the public sector, is now trying to earn his keep fightingly. His only earthly possession is a

small piece of land allotted by the Rajuk, and now dreams of building his beautiful shelter sometime, someday. His prosperous classmates point to him of being a big fool.

Some of the 'unwise' civil servants are in a soup when the inevitable date of retirement comes through. Those who have ambitious wives face a calamity now. One are the days of pomp and grandeur, parties and the shows to which the society ladies are used to. And now they find, that the incomes of their husbands have been halved, but they have to put up with them double the time. The harangues now start for the poor 'Past tense'. The dream of a leisure time vanishes for the poor husband. He is now being treated like a twenty-four year old unemployed youth, who should be out, job hunting in the Motijheel Commercial Area, to have some respite and peace in a quiet corner of a library or a park.

The lucky one amongst them gets some job, with fat salaries and no work, with ample time to browse through "Time" and "Newsweek". The fools are without a job. This saga goes on and on. In one of the Somerset Maugham's short stories a loving father told his young son who was on his way to Monte Carlo, that he should give a wide berth to wine, women and gambling. The boy violated all the three rules, and when he returned to London he had a bulging pocket-book and a ruddy look.

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.

Pension Scheme

Sir, Several hundred retired employees are yet to have their retirement benefits from sector corporations as they are hoping to get benefits as per Pension Policy of Govt Employees instead of Gratuity Scheme. They have retired from various sector corporations during the past three years or more. All those employees opted for Pension Scheme five years back but the Government is yet to approve this scheme.

The Gratuity Scheme was introduced during Pakistani days by PIDC authorities and in those days the pay and benefits of PIDC/EPIDC employees were much more compared to that of Govt Employees. Only recently the JS members have passed a law in the Parliament adopting Pension Scheme for

JS members alone though they serve for a maximum of five years only as JS members. The retired Corporation employees have served at least 27 years to 39 years. Under the above backdrop let the JS members decide Pension Scheme for those aggrieved or compensate for them as per gratuity in a fair manner.

Sadik Alee
Maghassar, Dhaka.

Let us learn

Sir, The sacred, green boundary of the Dhaka University was once again stained red with the blood of a brilliant student. Let me express my profound sorrow, and condolence to the bereaved

family, while deceased's father deserves our appreciation for not lodging a case as the result would be the 'traditional' one. As usual political leaders did not miss to express their 'fashioned' sorrow, and in the coming days many more mourning processions would be held and demand would be made to punish the killer... and time will come when everything will be forgotten.

If Raju was killed, virtually nothing went wrong with the leaders nor that party which he was told to be a member. But it is unfortunate parents and relatives who will have to bear this tragic memory till the last moment of their life.

Someday Raju's killer may be arrested and punished (if god blessed). But will the nation ever be able to punish the 'real killers' who are moving things from behind the curtain?

Raju's killing appears to be the outcome of 'selfish' competition of the 'leaders' to have their supremacy on one another. We would like to make a

fervent appeal to all political parties not to do things that might provoke tension in the educational arena where students come to learn and not to get killed.

Md. Reyazuddin
Mahammadpur, Dhaka

A clean city

Sir, The other day I had an opportunity to travel through various streets of the Dhaka city. Thanks to the Dhaka City Corporation for repairing, improving the poor and ugly road. The Mayor also deserves appreciation for his personal initiatives in this regard. We sincerely hope that the City Corporation will further intensify its efforts to offer even better services to the city dwellers. The city dwellers have also a duty to maintain their localities through conscious and concerted efforts.

A clean city can ensure a clean life.

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