

Amnesty Puts the Focus on 'The Ugly India'

Couldn't this 'Loadshedding' be Avoided?

We feared that it would happen one day. On Thursday it has been announced that it will, very soon. The Power Development Board (PDB) informed us through a press release that power shortage to the tune of 300 megawatt (mw) a day will have to be passed on to the consumers in the form of 'loadshedding'. The PDB definitely deserves a compliment for its sense of timing. With the heatwave reaching record levels and the expected rainfall still eluding us, the news that power will be in short supply, affecting domestic usage, including perhaps supply of water, could not but have brought smiles on our scorched faces.

'Loadshedding' — perhaps another South Asian contribution to English language, for the word does not appear in Webster's (unabridged, second edition) Dictionary — according to the PDB, has become necessary due to shortfall in power generation. This is due to power stations not being modernised, repaired or maintained because the World Bank did not release the committed funds, which in its turn is due to the fact that the PDB was unable to sufficiently reduce what has now come to be called 'system loss'. Additional reasons for short supply of power include lower water level at the Kaptai dam and temporary shortfall in natural gas supply.

With the installed power capacity of 2,300 mw and the highest current demand being 1,800 mw, it becomes difficult to understand why a shortfall of 300 mw should necessitate reducing power supply to the consumers. What needs to be looked into are the steps the PDB took when it came to know that the World Bank funds would not be forthcoming. According to the PDB, the funds have been withheld for more than one and half years. If that be so, the victims of the so-called loadshedding have a right to know what interim steps the PDB was able to take to meet the situation. Of more concern is the PDB's failure to curb the 'system loss'. The energy minister, the other day, in a TV programme on the subject, informed the audience that the system loss was down by a few percentage points. Hardly sufficient to make a substantial difference either in increasing power supply or in living upto the World Bank's conditions. Here in lies the crux of the PDB's failure. The term 'system loss' covers two different type of losses — one that is incurred through the process of transmission. Most of it is unavoidable but some of it perhaps is recoverable with better equipment. But the maximum limit for such loss is 14 per cent. What then accounts for our system loss of 41 per cent (the government's claim is about 37 per cent, which has supposedly come down to 34 per cent)? The answer is, by now, well known — inefficiency and corruption. The setting up of DESA which was supposed to improve on the bill collection and reduce the number of illegal connections, has not yet produced the desired results. Though the time has not yet come to pass any serious judgement on the usefulness of DESA, yet the early signs are hardly encouraging. Without changing the system, or the way PDB works, just decentralising it will not produce the desired results.

With the announcement of 'loadshedding' what is going to happen is that ordinary consumers of electricity will now to be punished for what is essentially PDB's inefficiency.

PDB has done practically nothing in identifying illegal connection holders. It has done nothing in instituting a supervisory mechanism that will tighten the performance of its employees. Normally, 'loadshedding' is resorted to when demands for power far outpaces the capacity to supply. In our case the supply is being reduced because the huge wastage is not being checked. So instead of punishing the consumers, PDB should put its house in order.

Bad News from Bangkok

Barring a section of traders and foreign entrepreneurs who seek short-term stability under the cover of dictatorship, there is no jubilation in Thailand over the appointment of General Suchinda Kraprayoon as the country's new Prime Minister. Posters have appeared in Bangkok protesting the assumption of power by an 'outsider', a reference to the fact that the Army Chief who had pulled a coup in February last year against the previous elected government of another general, Chatchai Choonahaven, did not run in the March 22 general election. In other words, the man who will now head the government enjoys no electorate mandate as such and, in principle, will be answerable to the parliament without being its member.

The appointment of General Suchinda followed the disclosure that Narong Wongwan, the first nominee by a five-party coalition which holds the majority in the House of Representatives, had been denied the US visa last year on suspicion in Washington that he had links with the international drug trade.

It is strange that the five-party coalition of civilian dominated political parties could not find a replacement for Narong without turning to the Army Chief Suchinda.

The suspicion in Bangkok is that all this has been stage-managed, a coup that has been sanctioned and approved by the parliament. In this sense, one could well make the point as the Bangkok daily, Nation has made that the army has 'institutionalised' the military control of the country's parliamentary politics.

Yet, the question is, how long can the military maintain the status quo? Thailand has seen turbulent politics, punctuated by coups through the past three to four decades. Thus, democracy in real sense was never given a chance to establish itself through parliamentary democracy. People from all walks of life put up with these repeated army take-overs in a mood of resignation, knowing full well that political parties offered them no alternative as such.

However, this decade which has already seen dramatic developments changing the future of countries, from the Soviet Union to Bangladesh, cannot leave Thailand alone. People in this Southeast Asian country have expressed their firm disapproval of the appointment of General Suchinda. It is only a question of time before this disapproval turns into a popular protest. A time bomb may be ticking away.

IT views with anguish the evidence of patent collusion between the police and the magistracy in denying the citizens their basic freedoms by arrests and detentions on grounds which were now admitted to be non-existent or deliberately invented. This observation is not by the Amnesty International but by the Shah Commission, which went into the excesses committed during the emergency 1975-77.

The police *zulum* has never been absent from India but it has got institutionalised since the Emergency of the mid-seventies. The police carries out willingly highhanded and arbitrary actions. It has ceased to be aware of what is right and there does not seem to be any desire to act according to what is right. It is now a repressive instrument in the hands of a repressive state.

What the Amnesty International has highlighted in its latest report on India is nothing sensational or shocking. Torture, rape or death in police custody is a daily occurrence in one part of India or the other. Several human rights organisations in the country have documented instances after instances and many newspapers have published the police excesses which their special teams have investigated. The National Police Commission has itself admitted that 'in the perception of the people, the egregious features of police are brutality, corruption, inefficiency, degrees of which vary from place to place and person to person.'

Therefore, the report does not come as a revelation. It should, however, make every

Indian sit up and wonder why the society has become so impervious, even cynical. Among the various reasons is the nexus of politicians, police and criminals that stands out. Those in power, now and earlier, have played havoc with the institutions for their personal ends. In the process, moral considerations have become generally dim and desire for self-preservation is the sole motivation for actions and behaviour. People have begun to live with the police excesses for their own different reasons.

The lower half, even if they were to agitate, — and they have done so at times — has ceased to matter in the quarters which wield authority or influence. There is a feeling of helplessness. On the other hand, this half is so absorbed in its struggle for existence that nothing else matters to it. They have been hurt so much that further hurt does not hurt them any more. Their torture at the hands of police is occasional but it is more frequent at the hands of employer, administrator, politician and mullahman.

People in the upper half — even the most sensitive — have got so inured to the system, where justice has become a relative term, that they do not bother what happens to the ones outside their class. The victim of police wrath is from the strata which is distant even from their thoughts. A death in the custody of police, whenever reported in parliament or the press, evokes

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their attention but only for a short while. They forget it soon; they have too many other preoccupations to dwell on deaths in lock-ups.

Yet, if the nation is to preserve the fundamental values of a democratic society, every person has to display a degree of vigilance and willingness to sacrifice. Why the sensitivity has evaporated from the society is the question — and how to restore the dividing line

prevailing in Punjab and Kashmir. The militants' relatives, including their parents, sisters and brothers, are detained illegally for days. In many cases, there is torture. This is to exert pressure on the militants to surrender. No amount of pleas in law courts have been of any avail. Even when some courts have intervened and passed strictures against the police, the government has taken no notice

are out to disintegrate India, even the most dictatorial actions taken by the state is accepted as if it is a necessary evil. The worse of tortures are condoned.

The police has had a free play. It was admitted at a recent conference of director generals of police that instances of third degree methods were on the increase. But this was again attributed to 'erosion of discipline and undermining of the morale of the police.' The three-year-old Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA) has emboldened the police most. The legislation puts the onus of proving innocent on the suspect.

I have, no doubt, as Ian Martin, secretary general of Amnesty International, says in a letter addressed to me that in raising the question of human rights protection in India we are motivated by the desire to help end the violations and promote those human values and standards which are universally recognised as applying to all people at all times. But where the Amnesty goes wrong is in its declaration to build up international opinion on the basis of its report.

This will only raise the hackles of Indian society. The government may be able to whip up sentiments in the name of nationalism as if some foreign powers are trying to interfere in its domestic affairs. This will negate whatever good work the Amnesty has done in pin-pointing the cases

of torture, rape and death. A possible scenario can be imagined by what Rajiv Gandhi said in 1990 when I, as India's High Commissioner in London, had cleared the visit of the Amnesty team to India to discuss with the foreign and home secretaries the modalities of visits by their teams. He said at that time that the Congress party would organise the same type of protest against the Amnesty team as they had against the Simon Commission, which toured India in 1928 in the wake of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre at Amritsar, to inquire why Indian opinion was turning against Britain.

In a country where the Amnesty has been viewed with suspicion — no doubt, wrongly — the wider the international opinion, the louder will be the chauvinistic call not to allow outsiders to look into India's domestic problems. The purpose of the Amnesty is to ensure that these abuses do not occur; its purpose cannot be to join issue with those who will try to arouse sentiments in the name of jingoism.

The Amnesty's efforts would go down better if it were to work through human rights organisations within the country. Ian Martin himself admits in his letter that numerous people in India, including judges, lawyers, writers and civil libertarians, as well as many police and other officials have forthrightly expressed their concern about these practices. Why doesn't the Amnesty associate itself with them? Seeking condemnation 'through a worldwide initiative' will only give a handle to the government which wants to cover up its tracks.

Between the Lines

Kuldip Nayar

between right and wrong, moral and immoral which has ceased to exist.

The 415 cases of death in police custody, recorded by the Amnesty, may not be correct to the last detail. But that is not the point. It has collated instances to indicate a pattern of cruelty and injustice that is perpetrated in a police cell. In fact, thins are far worse. A new, illegal procedure has come to be adopted whereby a suspect is picked up and detained for many days unrecorded. No record is sought from the court and no information is given to relatives regarding the whereabouts of the detainee. Even when he or she dies of torture, the police does not own the responsibility because there is no evidence to prove that the detainee died in police custody.

Still worse is the practice

of them.

The Government of India's argument that the Amnesty did not give New Delhi adequate time to counter the report is only a technical defence. The main point is whether the torture, rape or deaths took place or not. There is nothing to stop the government from proving even now that the instances pointed out by the Amnesty were incorrect. A bald denial will not, however, do. It will need to be supported by facts.

There is some weight in the official contention that the Amnesty's report has underplayed violence by the militants against the innocent in Assam, Kashmir and Punjab. The Amnesty's assurance that it will also focus on violence by the militants should pacify the critics. Since the general perception is that the militants

Aid Workers Struggle to Save Life as the Shells Fall

by Don Redding

After months of fighting, there is a tentative ceasefire in Mogadishu. Armed gangs occupy small patches of the Somali capital, changing their allegiances and territories constantly and unpredictably. In the chaos, reports Gemini News service, it has been left to five small aid agencies to help the hundreds of thousands of people affected by the fighting.

THE intense street fighting that broke out last November in Mogadishu, Somalia's capital, has battered the city into the ground and left its people hungry, homeless and desperate.

Until the United Nations-brokered ceasefire was signed on March 3, not a day went by without shelling, machine-gun fire or looting somewhere in the city. Few observers are confident that any ceasefire will hold.

As a result, Somalia has become the world's most urgent humanitarian crisis, a test case for the ability of the international community to respond to humanitarian emergencies. The fighting is deadly, but the scarcity of food may take more lives: famine now threatens the one million or so people in and around Mogadishu.

The UN is promising \$12 million worth of aid to Somalia, conditional on the ceasefire. But its humanitarian agencies, the only ones that meet the people's needs on the scale required, arrived only recently in Mogadishu. They had refused to operate there throughout the past year.

Until March, the city's humanitarian care has been left to five aid agencies: Save the Children (UK), the Red Cross, Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders), SOS Children's Villages and the International Medical Corps.

They have been providing medical care and relief on the front line of a war estimated to have killed 5,000 Somalis, with perhaps another 25,000 wounded.

The main conflict is between the forces of Ali Mahdi Mohammed, named as interim president following the civil war that ousted dictator Siad Barre, and Gen Mohammed Farar Aided, who disputes that claim.

In addition, there are dozens of armed gangs in the



Bands like this roam the streets of Mogadishu

city answerable to no one, each in control of a small patch of ground or a key facility.

As many as 300,000 people have fled to the scrubland beyond Mogadishu, taking whatever they can carry because they know their empty houses will be looted behind them. Camping in the bush, they have no proper shelter and little access to food and water.

When Save the Children surveyed part of this displaced population, it found that 35 per cent of the children were severely malnourished, and half were suffering skin diseases and diarrhoea from lack of water or from drinking contaminated water.

In their battle to save lives, agency workers are living within conditions few have experienced before.

'We have never been in a situation like this in our recent history,' says Andrew Timpon, Save the Children's programme officer for East

Africa, who visited the city in January.

'We've been involved in war zones in Ethiopia, Sudan and Uganda, but here we are close to the front line every day. In Mogadishu the intensity and chaos of the conflict is vivid, and the sheer unpredictability is so frightening.'

The Somali fighting is fast and mobile, says Timpon. 'The presidential forces may make a fast break and move into position with a big anti-tank gun or field artillery, and fire shells with great rapidity in the direction of Aided's headquarters, which is near the Save the Children house. We've had some close shaves.'

Irish nurse Siobhann Fitzgerald worked for Save the Children in Mogadishu from August 1991 to last February. 'One afternoon,' she recalls, 'I went back to work at Benadir hospital. As I got out of the car a shell landed, came through the roof of the building and fragments of cement

flew everywhere. I just turned around and went home. It took about two minutes, but by then shells were falling all around. I just stayed inside all afternoon on the ground floor. You don't go upstairs and you don't go out on the roof.'

In these conditions, the aid agencies have had to take unprecedented measures, including hiring their own security.

'We hire vehicles which come with three or four armed men,' Timpon says. 'The living compound has armed guards, the clinics are guarded, and the work is overseen by armed guards. We don't like it, but it's essential.'

Sophisticated communications are also vital. Every member of staff carries a walkie-talkie with a line permanently open — a silence of even 10 minutes is enough to make colleagues anxious.

In a city where front lines and clan loyalties can shift every day, the agencies must engage in continual daily negotiations and intelligence gathering simply to move around in safety.

In Aided's territory, agency vehicles are guarded by his Habar Gedir clan, but they will dismount at the boundary of the airport, which is controlled by the neutral Hawadle clan.

With these arrangements, Save the Children can keep open seven clinics where some 5,500 children are kept alive with food aid. It also channels medical supplies and administrative support to the Somali doctors and nurses of Benadir hospital, and it hopes to start aiding the displaced

people. 'Everywhere you go, people come up to you every few minutes asking for help,' Fitzgerald says, 'and they have the most terrible stories to tell.'

'Everybody has lost at least one family member in the fighting. It's very frustrating that there's so little you can do.'

Since much of the fighting

is about food, large quantities of food aid, available to combatants and non-combatants alike, would reduce the tension in the city significantly. If it is not carefully distributed, however, it will cause more conflict as people fight for their share.

Whether the UN can follow the lead of the five smaller agencies in engaging fully with a complex local situation remains to be seen.

DON REDDING is a press officer for the Save the Children Fund in London, where he works as a liaison between the agency's head office and its workers in Mogadishu.

OPINION

Iraq, Kuwait and Media Distortions

In The Daily Star of March 19, I found the Gemini feature entitled 'Why so much about the Gulf war went wrong' by Daya Kishan Thassu highly misleading because of its arbitrary postulates, factual distortions and slanted approach. As a professional media man of over three decades and on the basis of my on-the-spot observations in Kuwait for six months after liberation until last February as well as my decade-long stay there earlier, I write the following to put the situation in the correct perspective.

In the aforesaid article it is alleged, inter alia, that 'the human rights of Iraqi children are being violated by the UN (read US) dictated sanctions without any legal reason.' The truth is that any such misery was brought about and (this needs special emphasis) is being perpetuated by the Baghdad rulers themselves. Economic sanctions resulted directly from Saddam's aggression on Kuwait and are meant to ensure redress to the aggrieved parties. Iraq is required to pay 30 per cent of its oil sale proceeds for payment of compensation to hundreds of thousands of people of many nationalities including Bangladeshis, who suffered economic losses or mental anguish as a result of Iraq's aggression. But Saddam's Iraq has refused to sell oil and has there by not only blocked the payment of such compensation but has also deprived Iraqis themselves of the benefit of their own country's resources.

The ground proffered by Baghdad rulers to utilise the UN permission for the sale of oil dollar 1.6 billion worth of oil to meet Iraq's urgent needs is that any close monitoring of the oil sale deal by the UN would be inconsistent with the sovereignty of Iraq as an independent country. This is a devious logic. Did they care while trampling over the sovereignty of a peaceful neighbour? In fact, the UN monitoring is absolutely essential to keep account of the actual oil transactions in order to ensure the 30 per cent cut to pay the rightful dues of aggrieved parties including people — men, women children — in developing countries who lost their livelihood or suffered terribly as a

result of Iraqi aggression on Kuwait. The Iraq rulers, with their dubious reputation of playing evasive tricks, have forfeited any claim to be treated.

The Gemini article also recalls randomly certain pieces of the wartime news and uses it as a peg to portray Saddam and his regime as innocent victims of the media world. However, apart from the general axiom that wartime news stuff may always contain elements which could be debatable later, there is nothing cogent in the points made in the specific cases cited in the Gemini article. As for the incubator story, the postwar controversy raised by certain quarters has led to nothing substantial to disprove it. In fact, the incidence of atrocious episodes like this was conveyed to me personally in Kuwait during the Iraqi occupation by informed people including at least one senior Egyptian physician, Dr. Samir, and, some Indian paramedical staffers.

At any rate, any debate over some particular incident (s) does not help to make a case for the lifting of the UN sanctions. The list of proven atrocities is more than enough to justify and necessitate 'sanctions to ensure Baghdad's total compliance with its moral and legal obligations according to the world body's resolutions. Public memory is not so short as to forget the shameful rape of women, horrors of torture chambers set up by the Iraqis in Kuwait, colossal waste of resources through the torching of over 600 oil wells, outrageous vandalism like, outright destruction of half a million volumes of Kuwait University's library collection — the tale is endless.

Moreover, thousands of Kuwaiti children as well as mothers and wives are living in anguish about the fate of their fathers, sons and husbands who are still languishing under Iraqi detention, if not already lost there for ever. Is their genuine case not worth taking up by the journalists who talk piteously of Iraqi children on distorted premises?

Dr. Azimushan Haider Dhaka

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.

'The Dark Side of Japan's Work Ethic'

Sir, Ms Saverdri Kakuchi of IPS reports in her feature (Daily Star of 30th March) regarding the worst part of Japanese workaholic-ism. The working hours of an industrial labour, a Supervisor and a Manager often come to 2400 hours in a year. In good many cases this is exceeded, and in specific cases a worker had led himself to his death. These particular cases are tragic, and could have been avoided.

Japan has now reached the topmost position in the industrial world with hardly any natural resources, and certainly it could not have been earned without great sacrifices, including those tragic deaths.

We have a lot to learn from Japan. In our case the labour, the management and the Government are at logger heads. There are frequent stoppages of work, indiscipline, and often violence. Instead of a promotive and supportive role the Government often finds itself in an adversary situation. Our plentiful supply of labour no longer remains cheap. Our whole work ethic is to do as little work as possible, earn overtime as much as possible and putting in demands even when an enterprise is running at a loss. And in the end we succeed in killing the golden goose.

We can only shake ourselves from this malaise, only if the Government gives the lead, in building up a national consensus.

There is no royal road to development for us, excepting a minimum understanding between the various interest groups.

Shahabuddin Mahtab, Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Educational sector reform

Sir, Education in Bangladesh, specially at primary, secondary and higher secondary levels are awful, so to say. Education is not provided at these levels in the strictest sense of the term. The purpose of 'education' is to provide the students a sense of objective perception and analysis of the things. But in real sense, this purpose is very poorly met.

At all the above three levels, good-performances in the examinations exclusively depend on the students' memorising capacity which has been an ominous phenomenon. The institution of private tuitionship being another destructive

phenomenon of our 'educational system': Since good performances depend on memorising only, so some 'good performers' at the above three levels are often seen to cut bad figures in the varsity examinations because, in higher studies, objective perception and analysis are the prerequisites for doing good in examinations.

Bangladesh has been a very poor country. For her development, it needs rapid reforms in all sectors. Since she is unable to afford rapid reforms in all sectors simultaneously, so the decision-makers are to rank-order the sectors on priority basis. Education is the backbone of a nation. Without educational development, a nation cannot think of overall national development.

So educational sector reforms in Bangladesh merits topmost priority. The decision-makers should pay heed to this for the greater interest of this objectively poor nation.

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