

A Prescription for Progress

One can hardly deny that the future economic growth of Bangladesh largely depends on how fast we can set up industries, a process which, in turn, is linked to peace on the labour front, an increase in the productivity of the country's workforce and, last but not the least, on an uninterrupted political stability.

On all these issues, there is plenty of room for pessimism, with otherwise astute experts loudly proclaiming what they see as a hopeless scenario for Bangladesh. In this respect, the administration of Begum Khaleda Zia may well be at fault by concentrating too much on the dismal failure of the past regime of Hussain Muhammad Ershad instead of focussing on our future prospects in terms of policies and choices.

In this context, it is indeed reassuring to know from an internationally-known Bangladeshi expert that prospects for a breakthrough in the country's industrial future remains "bright", provided the specific pre-requisites, not necessarily beyond our reach, are met. The expert, S A M S Kibria who has just retired as the Executive Secretary of ESCAP, backed up his optimistic assessment with facts, during an exclusive interview to this paper published on Saturday. Here, Mr Kibria drew his lessons from what he has seen in the spectacular industrial progress made by South Korea and Thailand, among others. The key to their progress — indeed, to ours — lies in the expansion of the industrial base, in the relocation of factories producing a wide variety of products, ranging from garments and electronics to shoes and paper. The optimism of Mr Kibria is based on the premise: What is possible in Thailand and South Korea should be attainable in Bangladesh.

We would like our policy-makers to share this optimism. However, what is more important, the authorities should do their utmost to create conditions which help in the fulfilment of this optimism. We all know what needs to be done, ranging from training of our labour force to raising the level of its productivity to agreements with trade unions to prevent work stoppages and unreasonable demands for wage hikes and bonus. How does the government go about in creating these conditions? Surely, there is no single answer, no set prescription.

Here, we can only return to the subject we have taken up before in these columns — the need for a broad-based national consensus, based on the realisation that no matter which party is in power, we cannot alter the scenario, change the facts of life or see the last of natural calamities. This also means that the course set for our economic progress cannot be altered. After all, both the major parties, the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the opposition Awami League (AL) have accepted the role of the private sector as a key one in our agenda for progress. In this sense, a basis for consensus exists. What is necessary is to translate this consensus into political terms, within the framework of our democratic system. With the Jatiya Sangsad now in session, this is the time to make a new plea to give this much-needed national consensus a chance. We can no longer afford to lose time in seeking — and reaching — this consensus. The country is waiting.

Political Reporting

This is to wholeheartedly felicitate the Press Institute of Bangladesh on its holding a 10-day workshop on political reporting starting Saturday. In this country, born as it was as a result of political action based on economic and cultural aspirations of its people, politics was for long a much too maligned word and its practice, because of its erratic ways born of theocratic, autocratic and militarist pressures, still does retain a pejorative connotation. In such a backdrop, an organisation — of no less a stature than the PIB — taking up political reporting as its moot-point for a long workshop speaks well of a goodly change in establishment attitudes and should augur well for the development of a responsible and objective and professionally impeccable press in the country.

However, this may not be realised if all in the profession as also in the management of press do not start sharing in an uncompromising commitment to democracy. This is specially important if one recalls that during some regimes sycophancy was synonymous with journalism which took away lock, stock and barrel the justification of why should there be a press at all. Only an unreserved accountability to people, truth and fairness can help remove due stains of those days and make political reporting, generally the breeding ground of all that is false and malicious and motivated, a dependable watchdog on behalf of the people as well its educator.

Realising such a goal cannot be the business of a one-shot go and as such the present workshop should only be the welcome first link in a long and sustained strand of such brainstorming sessions.

It cannot be said that professional seminars and symposia, workshops and conferences addressed to improving the professional standard of Bangladesh journalism is infrequent. We very pertinently feel that there should be a mechanism to monitor the result of activity, however well-intentioned. The same should apply, perhaps with added emphasis, to the endresult of the present workshop. And that result can only be gauged through the issues of papers that come out in the wake of the workshop. If there is more tolerance and a little less of mudslinging and irresponsible kite-flying, we must count the workshop as a blessing.

It used to be said that a society gets the press it deserves. No, it is the many governments of the past that fashioned a press after their own liking which this poor and unfortunate society did not at all deserve. Can we take the workshop on political reporting as a beginning from that devilish pattern?

OURS is hardly a permissive society in the Western sense. Though there is a lot more free-mixing now than in the past, and though there are distinct signs of social changes, yet the horrific tales of young women's being subjected to all forms of atrocities suggest that a woman is not really free to say no to the advances of a man as this 'no' can endanger her life. This shows that we are miles away from a situation where a woman will freely choose a mate, and equally freely reject a lover without risking her honour or security.

In many other matters, however, our society is permissive to an extent beyond the dreams of more organised societies. Look how all our rules prohibiting this or that are generally, if not universally, flouted. We see motor vehicles with defective combustion and issuing black smoke freely moving in our city streets, without being challenged or otherwise taken to task by the policeman on duty. We see buildings coming up clearly violating building rules prescribing the free space between the structure and the road. Such things violative of rules cannot be done in complete secrecy. Most of us will remember, a few years ago, RAJUK demolishing quite a few buildings allegedly built without the permission of RAJUK, or contravening rules. Some of these structures stood by our broadest roads, on some very prominent sites. One wonders how such a grossly unlawful act

Permissive Society and the Press

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could at all be possible, under the very nose of authorities. Instances could be multiplied, the loud blaring of microphones at all hours of day and night, the unhindered sale of foreign and presumably contraband cigarettes, cosmetics and toiletry, the buses, minibuses plying on all our streets and roads with passengers beyond the prescribed number — to mention just a few — and at random. In every individual case just mentioned, there are specific laws prohibiting, and making punishable, the violation of these laws. Breach, rather than the observance, of these laws has become the rule. Remove the traffic police from the intersections of the city roads, and you will see how little respect is shown to the automatic direction of the traffic lights.

These are the hallmarks of a society which is naturally and instinctively permissive. But when I picked up this theme of permissiveness, all this was not my immediate concern, which was something quite different, a situation far from meriting censure, and in fact deserving a treatment in a perfectly placid frame of mind. I mean the plethora of newspapers and periodicals which

have made their appearance since the day the interim — and nonpolitical — government of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed lifted the restriction on the publication of these. No doubt, we have made the fullest possible use of this newly won freedom to publish. Hardly a day passes that does not bring with it a new name in the world of journalism.

cais, published from Dhaka and other towns, could well be ten times of what it was by the end of 1990.

Now, isn't this remarkable, in the highest degree? Neither literacy, nor the size of the reading public has increased on that scale during this short span of time. And let us look at the matter from another angle

Returning to the reading public, the size is possibly a little larger now, than it was a year ago. With the fall of an unpopular government, and with the renewal of the nation's political life, public interest in politics, drooping for so many years, has been revived.

Newspapers offer more, by way of news, than what they did in the recent past, and periodicals vie with each other, and partly also with the dailies, in offering both news and commentary. The press now apparently enjoys a large measure of freedom, if not complete freedom. Some readers have lately developed a taste to read, and subscribe to more than one paper, and this despite the fact that the price of all papers including dailies, have steadily gone up. The new turn in the nation's political life, the existence of a number of unresolved issues, the proceedings of a parliament which wears a new look, the surfacing of a number of submerged issues, and a general climate of eager questioning — all this can be clearly perceived if you turn the pages of our newspapers, and our periodicals whose main staple is politics. One can demur and say, there

is too much politics, but then the answer will be, what else is there as an alternative?

And what about the profession? The journalists? Their number must have swelled considerably, and there must be a large number of new recruits to the profession, mostly young. In fact, the novitiates are playing big role, especially in the area of periodicals, and no wonder. They have brought a new zest to the whole thing, and whatever other deficiencies one may find in much of their work, mostly due to lack of experience and lack of knowledge, it must be said to their credit that they bring freshness, an eagerness, a curiosity to it. And it is mainly due to their efforts that the number of fringement, those who are playing a complementary role in journalism, the columnists, the occasional writers, have emerged in good numbers. The whole scenario is one of competitiveness, also of a race for survival.

Why survival? Because of the known limited capacity of the reading public to support the number of dailies and periodicals. It is a question of sheer economy. But the gain, meanwhile, when a certain number of them have succumbed and disappeared, will still be considerable. The world of journalists, even after the inevitable losses, will be larger and richer, and the freedom, to the extent the press enjoys it now, has all the promise of being a permanent gain for the whole nation.

PASSING CLOUDS
Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

How do the people belonging to this world feel about it? I do not know, speaking for myself.

All I know is that there is a stir and a commotion, if not exactly a euphoria, in our Fleet Street. But do we have a Fleet Street in Dhaka? That too, is beyond my knowledge, but I guess that there is a concentration, or a localisation, of newspapers and periodicals in certain areas of the city, known to be the commercial hub of the metropolis. But this is not important. What is really important is that, during the past year, the increase in the number of dailies and periodicals

— the production of newspaper in our only newsprint mill. All our dailies, and virtually all our periodicals are dependent on newsprint which is a domestic product. A ten-fold increase in the number of newspapers and periodicals does not necessarily entail a ten-fold increase in the production of newsprints. In fact, the production may not have increased at all. For so many years now, the nation has been fed with gloomy news about the state of health of our only newsprint mill. If production is static over there, the consumption of the same article by so many more months raises a question, doesn't it?

NATO Searches for a New Sense of Security

by Daya Kishan Thussu

With the end of the Cold War, NATO is getting together with its former adversaries to discuss security. At a meeting of the North Atlantic Co-operation Council, the former Soviet republics were admitted to a pan-European security order. As NATO outlines a new strategy for the future and expands its mandate, reports Gemini News Service, the search for a new enemy may fall on a Third World target.

ABC of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
Member countries

Permanent HQ
The Heysel, Brussels (Since Oct 1967)

Secretary-General
Manfred Wornier (Germany)

The parties to this Treaty are resolved to unite their efforts for collective defence and for the preservation of peace and security

Yeltsin has even talked of creating "a new system of security from Vancouver to Vladivostok".

After the Cold War, NATO was criticised because so much of its military deployment looked unnecessary. Then, to the delight of the world's defence industries, came the Gulf War. "Third World threats" to Western "security" began to rise up the defence agendas.

The war showed that in the so-called new world order, an effective and mobile force was required to safeguard the West's strategic interests.

NATO has recognised the need for change. In its Rome summit last November a "new strategic concept" replaced the old reliance on "forward defence" with an emphasis on crisis management and preventive diplomacy. A Rapid

Reaction Force was created for "flexible and effective deployment of allied forces".

A more flexible NATO structure has been called for by analysts to cope with danger of ethnic conflict, as in Yugoslavia and parts of former Soviet Union.

Last December, the NACC was inaugurated as a forum for cooperation between NATO and its former adversaries in the Warsaw Pact.

Its main purpose is to exchange security concerns, and to help former communist countries of Europe restructure their defence industries. One view is that the Council's task will overlap with the work of the unwieldy 48-nation CSCE.

Fearful that the Soviet break-up could let the nuclear genie out of its bottle, the CSCE welcomed to its fold in January all the Soviet republics except Georgia, including those of central Asia, which by definition are outside Europe.

The feeling was that the Asian Muslim republics might be lost to anti-Western regimes in the Middle East unless they were brought into the Western alliance.

As the CSCE security arm, NATO troops may be deployed outside NATO territory — for instance, in disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh.

In addition, under the auspices of the NACC, NATO troops can legitimately be used outside the area covered by the alliance's mandate.

This could justify NATO involvement in the strategically vital areas, such as the Middle

East. NATO secretary-general Manfred Wornier says arguments about whether military operations were "out-of-area" were becoming irrelevant.

The North Atlantic Treaty merely defined the region within which the allies were committed to defend one another. NATO forces are already operating outside that area — on many occasions in 1991, including the Gulf and northern Iraq — and would continue as part of an "interlocking architecture" of western security organisations.

What worries many people in the developing world is how this rapid reaction force is going to affect them. The Gulf War showed that the West will go to any length to safeguard its strategic and economic interests.

Already the process of identifying new security targets is underway. Most are in the Third World.

The New York Times reported in February that in the post-Soviet phase Pentagon planners saw Iraq, North Korea and "narco-terrorists" as potential foci.

Another reason for this shift in focus is the increasing independence shown by Europe, whose need for the United States security umbrella is diminishing. Already disagreements have been voiced. Since

German reunification, Bonn has been working for an enhanced European identity for NATO. France is also a vigorous advocate of a more independent European foreign and defence policy.

The US has resisted an autonomous European force within NATO and does not approve the plan of President Francois Mitterand and Chancellor Helmut Kohl to integrate the WEU and its embryonic army into the European Community after 1996.

The Franco-German plan could undermine the US presence and influence in Europe, currently justified by its leading role in NATO (the US is the largest contributor to its budget).

The row over world trade talks between the US and the EC is another indicator of the tension among the allies. In February, US Vice-President Dan Quayle linked this to NATO when he threatened to pull troops out of Europe if the talks on the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) failed.

Already, some NATO members question the relevance of spending huge amounts of money on security when the enemy has disappeared.

Citing financial reasons, Canada announced in early March that it would phase out its troops from Europe. The Canadian action may be but the beginning of a process which could see gradual North American disengagement from Europe.

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OPINION
Where Vietnam Went Wrong

Peyton Johnson's interesting article on Vietnam, published on Friday, recalls the fact that the country received precious little aid from the normally generous world community of nations to reconstruct its war ravaged economy. We are reminded of the billions poured into Western Europe and Japan after World War II. Who is to blame for this?

Surely Vietnam's leaders themselves! Vietnam and its people had an abundance of empathy, goodwill and admiration when they defeated a mighty giant — the USA, after years of fierce warfare. Much as the general populace of the Far East and South East Asia distrusted communism, they could not hold in awe and respect the victory of a nation which had fought so hard and valiantly against first the French colonialists and subsequently against the most powerful nation on earth which had spared no cost or effort in trying to pound a tiny adversary into submission.

In the US itself, the Vietnam War tore the fabric of society apart and divided the country to such an extent as it had never been since its own Civil War. Thus, a huge sigh of relief was hand throughout the world when the Vietnam War came to an end in April 1975.

But, what happened thereafter? We, in Southeast Asia (optimistically?) expected the Vietnamese leaders to lay down their arms and become involved in peaceful reconstruction to compensate in some way, for the long suffering people, no matter how small the beginning — for their

protracted years of sacrifice. That did not happen.

Instead, the victorious leaders tried hard to impose their will on their weaker neighbours — Laos and eventually invaded Cambodia though this could be interpreted as an act of mercy in view of the atrocities committed by the brutish Khmer Rouge.

The highlight of the years following the Vietnamese victory, must be the flight of its largest minority race — the Chinese, whom humanitarian organisations dubbed "the boat people". No one in his right mind would wish to be a refugee living in squalor and waiting for long years in uncertainty for admission to a permanent abode. Then, only to start all over again. Yet, numberless (mostly of Chinese origin) were driven to flee the unfriendly shores of Vietnam to brave shark-infested waters and rapacious pirates to face questionable futures in foreign lands.

This massive and tragic exodus has taken place over to decades. During this period Vietnam squandered the fund of goodwill, admiration and moral support it had garnered.

Hence, it comes as no surprise that aid from the international community came in dribs and drabs. Any country which persecutes its minorities will, sooner or later, join the ranks of pariah nations. This is what is happening in Myanmar now. History, unfortunately, has an unhappy knack of repeating itself — if leaders allow it.

Nancy Wong
Old DOHS, 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.

Police and criminals

Sir, It was reported in the Press that the police had detained more than 20,000 bad characters in Dhaka city, but the crime rate is not decreasing. Have they arrested the wrong persons? Why they cannot apprehend those who are still active? The Police arrive at the scene of crime immediately after the criminals had left. They cannot apprehend the "massing drivers" who always manage to "escape".

Do we infer that the police are insensitive to self respect (face-saving), or they get too many "don't" orders from their bosses? Would the Home Minister kindly clarify the situation?

A citizen
of (crime city) Dhaka

National consensus

Sir, I am delighted to read the commentary of Mr SM Ali on the need for national consensus. Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries of the world. Hundreds of thousands of crises are reigning large in

the country. National leadership seems to be absent. Different leaders of a hundred political parties are quarrelling among themselves as if they are only power mongers.

There are crises in every aspect of life — social, political, economic, educational and what not. In the education sector it is observed that the standard has fallen down the level of all time. Teachers have forgotten to teach the students in the class. They are much more interested to carry on their private — tuition business in affluent families. The poor students, therefore, have been forced to utter failure in the examinations. No sane person can remain silent while visualizing all these maladies.

Besides, security of life and security of property have been the great crises in day to day life of the people who have been the worst victims of arson, murders, robberies, hijackings, rape and all other crimes.

Under the circumstances, a great cry amongst the people has been raised: Who will save the nation and the country? Who will be the saviour, friend,

philosopher and guide? The leadership of the larger political parties cannot cope with prevailing circumstances. The trail of Golam Azam and the warrant of arrest of the twenty four personalities have further aggravated the situation. As such sign of great crisis looms large in the country. The war ravaged country cannot any longer bear the brunt.

Now required is the national consensus to save the country from any such great crisis. We all hope that the patriotic forces will immediately come forward to save the nation.

Md. Khalid Hossain,
Hartna, Peropur.

Postal service

Sir, Sending Eid cards to friends and relatives has become one of the important parts of the Eid celebrations. But sometimes it so happens that the Postal Department (may be due to heavy mail pressure) fails to deliver these cards to the addressee in due time. It was announced that although there was a holiday, the postal authority had arranged to make delivery of the ordinary mails on April 4. I am not sure if all the post offices and postmen had performed their duty on that day.

We are aware that our postmen are low-paid and they have numerous problems. I can

still remember, when I was in England, I saw the postman used to come very early in the morning and in late afternoon, by, of course, a car. And he was very friendly to me. When I left England, I greatly missed the postman with many other friends. Of course, we cannot think of our postmen coming by car for delivering letters but our authority can at least provide them with some group transportation or bicycles and other possible facilities so that they can perform their duties smoothly. On the other hand, the authorities should keep a vigil whether the postmen are attending their respective localities regularly and delivering the mails to the exact addressee without delay. It should be noted that missing, or delay in delivery of even an ordinary mail can cause serious trouble either to the sender, or the receiver, or both.

Meanwhile, after the Eid day, my aunt told me in a sad tone — "I haven't received a Eid card from you this year". "Neither do I", I replied. But we both laughed. Then, what went wrong? The aunt asked. I smiled while quoting from a BTV's popular magazine programme — "Mone Hoi Dakpener Jwr Hoyechhey" (I thing, the postman has caught a fever!)

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