

Dhaka, Sunday, April 26, 1992

Talks about Rohingyas

The visit of Myanmar Foreign Minister Ohn Gyaw has got off to a good start, raising hopes that talks about the safe repatriation of over two lac Rohingyas refugees to their own homes would produce "positive outcome," as Mr Gyaw himself said on his arrival in Dhaka on Thursday. The initial statements by the leaders of the two delegations were straightforward and precise, while the decision to set up a top-level working group to evolve a framework suggests that the two foreign ministers have already agreed on the guidelines, without which the exercise undertaken by the working group would be largely unproductive, if not futile. So, on this score, we can view the situation with guarded optimism.

At this stage, one cannot help speculating about a possible change of attitude on the part of the Myanmar Government, a change from what had until recently appeared to be a negative position to a broadly constructive one. One can attribute this change, if it is really there, to the visit of the UN envoy Jan Eliasson to Yangon and to the subsequent assurance, obviously based on some hints from Myanmar authorities, by the Secretary General Boutros Ghali that Rohingyas refugees would be repatriated to their own country. In this context, what is still more important is the resignation of General Saw Maung, the head of the junta that has ruled Myanmar since the 1988 coup, which has raised hopes that the headline approach so far adopted by the so-called State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) would now make way for a more flexible one and that the change would be reflected on the junta's position on the whole range of internal and external issues.

While Bangladesh should study these prospects for a change within Myanmar carefully, we will be advised to concentrate on the issue at hand — namely, the repatriation of the Rohingyas — instead of pinning hopes on the change of leadership in Yangon. Any plea offered by the Myanmar delegation to give the new leadership in Yangon time to consolidate its position before the country reopens its doors to its returnee nationals should be firmly but politely rejected by Dhaka.

The issue at hand is the repatriation of Rohingyas refugees, but there are other factors involved. With the 15th list of refugees just submitted to the Myanmar authorities by Dhaka, the number of Rohingyas, now sheltered in Bangladesh, stands at 191,263. If the visiting delegation takes the unlikely position of disputing this figure, officials of the UNHCR should be invited to use their established international procedures to check on the authenticity of the lists submitted by Dhaka. In other words, it should not be a matter of unilateral decision by Yangon or an issue for accommodation or compromise between Bangladesh and Myanmar. The question of promoting bilateral relations between the two countries is one thing; the right of the Rohingyas refugees to return to their homes is a completely different thing. Similarly, the working group should agree on as short a timeframe as possible for the return of the refugees to Myanmar. The whole process should be completed in a matter of months, if not weeks. Again, on returning to Myanmar, the Rohingyas should face no obstacles in regaining control of their properties, such as land, homes and cattle, which may well have been taken over by the state. There is also a cost of their rehabilitation in their shattered homes. If the Myanmar authorities handle these issues in the right manner, combining justice with compassion, Yangon would certainly be entitled to limited international assistance and due appreciation from Bangladesh.

A Feast for Cattle

Cattle and poultry animals are having lots to eat at Shingair in Manikganj. They are indeed on a seemingly unending feast of vegetables they could only sniff or peck at before their present turn of luck. Or looking at it from the point of view of their peasant-masters — it is a spell of misfortune that they are undergoing owing to their farm produce failing to hit the markets of the capital city only 30 kilometres away.

A Daily Star report has attributed the bovine feasting to a conjunction of three factors. Poor communication, very low fetching price for the end-of-the-season vegetables, high transport cost. For some items of vegetable — the price paid in Dhaka by the consumer is almost wholly the transport cost of the quantity.

The problem of the Shingair people falls in line with pineapple and lemon worth crores of taka rotting every year for this or that sets of reason none of which are beyond human control.

The Star report used a very interesting expression when saying that the place inhabited by about 2 lakh farmers is "water-locked". So long we used to know of states and regions "land-locked" in the absence of any access to a sea or river outlet. Water used to freeze rather lock a place up. What is amiss with Shingair which is girdled by two mighty branches of the great Padma, namely the Dhaleswari and the Kaliganga? The rivers could mean — it did mean so long — cheap transports in huge bulk to the city markets. Otherwise Shingair wouldn't have developed as a main supplier of vegetables to the city in the first place. Now that native innovation has made water-borne transport faster by a factor of 3 to 5, Shingair shouldn't at all be looking for land routes to Dhaka. On a closer examination of the problem we are confronted with the facts of the big rivers getting so emaciated in the drought season, thanks to Farakka and silting and defoliation and reasons ad nauseam, that even country boats cannot navigate them. Besides, none of the two rivers run directly into the capital. And then there is a frustrating lack of inner communication linking the 22 local haats or wholesale vegetable centres.

All such factors join up to fix a floor-price for vegetables. What is that floor-price? Is it Tk 6 for a kilo of bitter gourd or karola at New Market? What has end of the season to do with the demand for vegetables falling? Are vegetables taken for novelty's sake alone? Why did karola price tumble down to Tk 6 from a dizzying Tk 20? The problem of rotting Shingair vegetables has this element of bad food practices of the towns people also. When will they be healed of their unhealthy craze for foods made out of animal carcasses, garnered with the richest spices and primed by the fatty acids?

There is no point in the consumer eating more transport than vegetable when he pays Tk 16 for a kilo of say patol. Collection and movement situation must be improved at Shingair and such other places. The task is to remedy the loss of market.

Profit for Growth: Change in Attitude Needed

If you borrow 10 million Taka from the world market in equivalent US dollars for setting up a textile weaving factory, the interest payments would amount to less than half a million Taka per annum with no exchange rate depreciation. If the same amount is borrowed from a local bank, then such interest payments will be two and a half times more. This is an utterly ridiculous situation. Nowhere in the world investment can be generated entirely from equity funds. Borrowing from banks, supplier's credit, deferred payments and a host of other financing arrangements feature prominently in the massive industrialisation taking place all throughout East and South-east Asia. Behind China's rural industrialisation programme resulting in the setting up of millions of small and medium scale industrial units, long-term industrial investment loans at only 6 per cent interest, with a grace period of one or two years, in order to allow the industry to come into full operation, have been the key factor. Without liberal financing arrangements, industrial growth often at 30 to 40 per cent per annum in the fast growing economies of Asia would have been stunted in no time. Instead of the high speed gallop of a stallion, the pace slows down to the hardly moving creeping-up of the tortoise.

The world of business moves entirely on profit. Unless there are literally gold in the sand, why should capital move to our part of the world? There must be profits to be made at rates which are at least equal if not more than in Thailand or Malaysia and China or Singapore. Our interest rate policy has, however, fully ensured that such profit-taking must not ever be feasible. Foreign investor will never appear with hundred per cent equity investment. He will require credit both as fixed and working capital. And, at 18 per cent interest which is again compounded every month so that the effective rate is as much as 22 per cent at the end of the year, the foreign investor would simply run away by the first available flight out of Bangladesh.

Alternative

The alternative might be to borrow from Hong Kong or Tokyo Bank of the foreign investor and then come up with brief-case full of ready cash to invest. He will then require no financing from the local banks. Unfortunately, this is not a realistic option; in fact it is rather naive since government does not provide for any guarantee against devaluation of our currency. If the investor borrows in dollars, he must repay with the same currency. Today the exchange rate is around Taka 38 to one US dollar; if it falls to Taka 45 in the next 2/3 years, then how will the investor manage to repay his loans made outside Bangladesh? His profit margin from the enterprise is not guaranteed to go up in the same proportion.

The Asian economies which have sustained high rates of growth have, at the same time, enjoyed the inflow of billions of dollars of direct foreign investment (DFI) every year, during the last ten to twenty years. The dollars have come because the investors could see the opportunity to multiply their investments while the exchange rates remained fairly stable. Thai Baht during the last six years have moved within a very close range of 25 to 26 Baht to one US dollar, a variation of 2 to 5 per cent, up

or down, and this is the chief characteristic of a stable currency. Same has been the case with Malaysian Ringgit, Singapore Dollar or Korean Won.

During the same period, Bangladesh Taka has tumbled downward at rates which have only helped us to remain a least developed country. The salary of a Deputy Secretary to the government in 1972 was equivalent to around US dollar 250; today after 20 years, and few years left before retirement, the take home pay of the same officer has gone down to 200 dollars equivalent.

The issue of an attractive return or handsome profit, if raised with the decision-making

investment. Such people should be praised; they need to be vigorously supported, virtually nurtured in the state incubator, so that they could grow and flourish. Business must generate good profit and then it would automatically create jobs and income for others.

Adverse Attitude

The entirely negative and adverse attitude towards profit so strongly prevalent in our South Asian culture is conspicuous by its absence in practically the rest of Asia. Even in communist China with its ideological aversion towards private property and capital, this has enormously changed, encouraging small and

medium-scale entrepreneurs to flourish and even tolerating the class of rich capitalist among the proletariat. It is now universally recognised that the United States is the richest and the most prosperous country in the world; it is because there exist a million millionaires who in turn have created millions of well-paid jobs in the private sector.

Along the streets of Bangkok, Hong Kong, Seoul or for that matter, any rapidly growing city of Asia, the most common sight is that of small pick-ups and minitrucks ferrying goods cross-town in hurry. Often the vehicles are parked in a corner selling fresh farm produce of the season. Numerous shop-houses abound these cities where the down-

stairs is used for business purposes managed by the family and hardly any hired worker, while the family living quarters are located at the upper floors. The overhead a costs are thereby minimized since even the small pick-up of the family is often parked inside the shop at night. More significant is the fact that for the young ones of the family, business gets into their head pretty early in life. The generation of young successful capitalists and entrepreneurs who have now emerged in Asia, aggressively pursuing joint ventures, have mostly come out of these shop-houses of teeming Asian cities. They are well-recognised persons, competent and command admiration or respect of others without any malice or hostility.

In Bangladesh, it is difficult to foresee the emergence of such a capitalist class. Apart from other constraints, government taxation policy is bound to ensure that nobody should enjoy a large profit. Tax rates are ridiculously high, so much so that an honest tax payer at high income brackets often must surrender up to 90 per cent of his profit to the authorities. Thus the main incentive to business expansion is deliberately taken away. There is no denying that a reasonable share of business profit must reach the state coffer but the present perception in terms of the prevailing tax structure is such that businessmen are thoroughly squeezed so that only the skeleton of profit is left high and dry in the desert sands.

But to do so, we must cherish profit not decri it as black marketeering; admire those who succeed in business — not castigate them as devils and smugglers. A radical change in values and attitude is required on an urgent basis.

For this to happen, liberalism in all economic policies is a must. It is not only easy credit on soft terms, but liberal tax policies and stable exchange rates are significantly important. Above everything else, profit for growth must be assured. This is the master key to success.

WINDOW ON ASIA

Shahed Latif

ers of the country, the immediate response will be — how much profit do you want? We often do not realize that the above question embodies a deep-seated mistrust and an intensive psychological aversion to profit. Our middle class value structure is prone to suspect all businessmen and profits are always considered to have been ill-gotten. To us the colour of money from profit is black and when it is a foreigner making such money, we even tend to become hostile. Never for once we prize then business acumen or the skill and the management talent of the investor who, fighting against harts and power cuts and in spite of the protection money paid to the local hoodlums, manages to generate handsome return from his

medium-scale entrepreneurs to flourish and even tolerating the class of rich capitalist among the proletariat. It is now universally recognised that the United States is the richest and the most prosperous country in the world; it is because there exist a million millionaires who in turn have created millions of well-paid jobs in the private sector.

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Curtailed Opportunity

At the same time, businessmen are not all angels. But if the cost of credit is so high, if the exchange rate is unstable and taxes must be evaded through unfair means in order

Colombian Indians Defend their Economic Resource

by Angela Castellanos

INDIANS could become partners of the Colombian State for the first time, thanks to the efforts of a woman, Rosario Epiyuu. This 35-year-old leader of the Wayuu community acts as a representative for her ethnic group in the dealings with the state-run petroleum and salt company Ili-Concesion Salinas.

'Shaio,' as she is popularly known, belongs to the Wayuu ethnic minority, which is made up of about 100,000 people living in the Guajira peninsula in northern Colombia. Their main economic activity is the exploitation of salt marshes, which they have been practising since long before the arrival of the Spaniards in the 16th century.

Because the Wayuus are a society organised around matrilineal clans it is not unusual for a woman to be the head of the community. 'It has always been us women who have acted as spokespersons for the people and who have solved its problems,' Shaio explains.

For the Wayuus salt is one of the reasons for their existence, and according to their genesis, 'Marewa, the creator of men, made the sea and the land. When the sea came to the land, salt was made, and the Wayuus were created to collect it.'

However, this harmonious

conception was badly battered last September, when the government started to promote a plan to exploit salt marshes and signed a contract with the Army to extend the dikes.

Alarm spread within the Wayuu community, because the plan would affect the 'ponds' or salt crystallisation pools, where the Wayuus work. They then organised two marches in the salt marshes of Manare, participated by 4,000 indigenous and non-indigenous people. They managed to get the contract suspended.

'There were talks of privatising the salt marshes, including ours, because they are deemed to be wastelands, in spite of the fact that we had been exploiting them long before their arrival. So we travelled to Bogota and spoke to the government authorities,' Shaio says.

The Wayuus' loss of sovereignty over the salt marshes has been a gradual process. During the colonial period some maritime salt marshes went into the hands of the Spanish Crown.

After that, in 1968, the Colombian State took them over and created the company Ili-Concesion Salinas in order to exploit them. The Wayuus were left with a reduced number of small 'ponds' to exploit.

'We have had problems with the company for a long time now. Some 20 years ago they

destroyed the marshes (around 4,000 hectares) and turned them into artificial pools where water is collected for salt exploitation. This means we cannot fish anymore. Besides, they damaged two freshwater streams and this decimated the woods in the area,' the Indian leader complains.

But the disastrous effects of the works did not only affect the indigenous community. They also caused serious damage to the local ecosystem, destroying an area of 10 kilometres, which consisted mainly of a mangrove swamp. This in turn forced the migration of many bird and fish species, particularly flamingoes.

Finally, the littoral, which used to be sedimentary, has undergone visible erosion in the past 10 years.

'Those 3,000 men and women who used to work in the company's ponds had no working tools and we were paid a pittance.'

When the Wayuu community

started to build its own ponds the company resorted to the police. They would come and take away our salt bags and throw them into the sea,' Shaio adds.

They said we were competing against them. So we went on a strike in 1988 and the company committed itself to giving us tools, drinking water and to providing health services,' she explains.

'Now there has been an outbreak of tuberculosis and the health centres lack the necessary equipment and adequate medical attention,' she points out.

According to official figures, the Wayuu community extracts 200,000 tons of salt, which amounts to 50% of the records of Ili-Concesion Salinas. The entire production supplies salt to the chemical industry and covers 70% of domestic

consumption, apart from a small amount that is exported. In spite of the efforts made by the Indians, there are obstacles to negotiations. The main obstacle is that they want us to form a cabildo (a meeting of the whole community) in order to negotiate. But we have never had this type of assembly before.'

It is true that other indigenous communities have this structure, but the Wayuus expect the government to respect their internal organisation.

The political organisation of this community is based on custom law and justice is administered informally. They are organised around the family structure, and they are represented by clans and members of a family. 'If a woman has seven children, the eldest has to solve problems,' the leader explains.

'We are not inventing laws to deal with the government, but simply applying our own customs. Our argument is that the company is indebted to us because they took away the marshes from us and because we were prevented from making a profit. In exchange we are asking to become part-

ners,' Shaio sums up.

The Wayuus also claim ownership of the land and rights over the salt, apart from compensations for damage to their culture. They demand royalties over the mining resources and their safeguard, which has been destroyed by the so-called state reserves.

'I've been working for the improvement of the Wayuus for years. I even worked with the local politicians but they always asked me for votes. I got them the votes all right, but after the elections they never helped us. Now it is Wayuus who have trusted me to be their representative,' the Indian leader says.

As the negotiations start, the Wayuus hope the government will realise that economic development should not sacrifice the existence of indigenous groups and natural resources. This will make it possible for salt to be a resource for everyone, just as it was before the Spanish colonisation.

— Third World Network

Features
Angela Castellanos is a correspondent for the Women's Special Service (Servicio Especial de la Mujer — SEM).

To the Editor...

True university teacher

Sir, It is really painful that a true university teacher is difficult to find nowadays. He uses his association with university for other benefits. He is either doing a consultancy work, or running his own business or doing a job or busy with seminars/workshops, or sitting as member of different committees, etc. The needs of his students are very little in his mind.

In the past a teacher was fully committed to teaching. I heard the story of a teacher of the Economics Deptt. of Dhaka University who, when he could not come to class due to sickness, would call his students home and sitting on his bed would communicate knowledge to his students. It sounds like a fairytale in the context of today's teacher's commitment to teaching.

Nowadays a teacher would frequently miss classes. Sometimes he would give a notice stating that he would not take his classes due to unavoidable reasons. Most often he would not care to give such a notice because being absent from classes has become too common. Students would come and flock in front of the classroom and wait and then leave in dejection. At other times he would come to classes without any preparation. In the class his least attention and interest to teaching would look very apparent. Sometimes he would sit in his room and forget that he has a class to take. Teaching is really a burden for him.

The world of knowledge is constantly expanding. But due to their mindfull indifference to teaching, content of syllabus is not updated. The students are not becoming acquainted with current knowledge. The writer has this experience while he was a student of public administration deptt and business administration deptt of Dhaka University. It is not meant that all teachers are like this. But nowadays most are.

I guess the system of teaching here is based on the premise that teachers' conscience is what will keep them dedicated to teaching. But I also guess this does not work. A system of accountability should be introduced to protect the student community from a lack of quality education. The writer is now studying abroad in the business administration and the situation there is in total contrast to what he experienced here. Higher education in Bangladesh suffers from many problems. Teacher's indifference to Teaching is one such problem.

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Parliament Round-up

Sir, In the present parliamentary democratic set up of Bangladesh, the importance of parliament has increased manifold. It is natural that Bangladeshis as well as foreign nationals in Bangladesh take interest in the parliamentary affairs of Bangladesh more than ever before. But it is a dis-

heartening fact that the foreigners are being deprived of the opportunity of knowing the proceedings of the parliamentary sessions.

In the past, there was an English programme called "Parliament Round-up" broadcast on Bangladesh Television. For some unknown reason, it was stopped some days ago.

We, therefore, earnestly request the BTV authority to resume the Parliament Round-up in English immediately.

Sharah Yazdani
Navil Behzad
Banani, Dhaka.

Kidney patients

Sir, Recently in a television report the situation of kidney diseases and treatment facilities available for the kidney patients in our country were shown. It was reported that a huge number of persons in our country are suffering from various kidney disorders. But the treatment facilities available is too meagre and costly. Only a few private clinics have started offering dialysis facilities to the kidney patients. It is deeply felt that more kidney clinics should be set-up in our country especially to offer less costly treatments to the poor patients. We would fervently urge upon the government to provide some trade privileges to those who are interested to invest in this human welfare oriented service sector.

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OPINION

Cotton Farming

It is heartening to note that the authorities have decided to replace production of tobacco with that of cotton. This decision is not only significant from the standpoint of curtailment of tobacco production which has been established to be a health hazard when used in cigarettes, bidi etc, but also that it would give the farmers/growers a viable alternative for livelihood.

Cotton is a 'natural' fibre, as such its use is free from health/environmental hazards unlike 'man made fibres' like polyesters etc, use of which may be gradually discouraged in favour of cotton. Cotton can become a very lucrative cash crop for the growers provided production and quality are maintained to the needs of the 'users' (textile mill owners, export oriented fabric manufacturers, handloom owners, yarn manufacturers).

Our basic need of clothing is being provided by the handlooms and the power weavers who produce lungis, gamchhas, sarces etc. The yarn that they use are being supplied by the local textile mills, who for their part import raw cotton to make the yarn; as such local content of raw cotton is very negligible, if not nil. As such any amount of cotton that can be produced locally will be used up by the above consumers.

In order to ensure that this decision of the Agriculture Ministry to replace production of tobacco with that of cotton achieves the desired results I have the following suggestions:

Owners Association, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, Bangladesh Hosiery Association, commercial banks, Grameen Bank, with the responsibility to formulate a coherent policy — short term, medium term and long term — so that the cotton production is guided by the policy objectives for the greater interest of all concerned and the nation as a whole.

(2) A study must immediately be initiated/carried out by way of 'Technical Assistance' from the World Bank/ADB to consider the feasibility of growing cotton on a large scale under the prevailing soil condition and acreage available, growers available etc and its impact on import substitution and input to developing local fabrics for feeding the export oriented readymade garments industry. Through this study, by hiring consultants of the highest calibre in this field — both local and international — we would be able to obtain recommendations which may be used in policy formulations.

(3) The growers must be encouraged to switch over to cotton production as soon as possible. This will depend a lot on how the Agriculture Ministry proceeds to woo the growers. Since the bottom line is financial prosperity, two things are to be addressed — (i) a guaranteed 'fair price' for their produce, (ii) adequate financing during the growth period of the cotton crop. In this context, commercial banks, Grameen Bank should be encouraged to come forward to support the programme. In addition, NGOs can also contribute positively.

(4) The Agriculture Ministry should initiate procedures to accumulate reliable data/statistics as to the annual requirements of cotton. Naturally, cotton required for making yarn for the export oriented fabric industry will be different from the local yarn industries' requirements, as such statistics should reflect the correct position.

Our export oriented readymade garments industry is meeting its need by importation of cotton fabrics which are not locally available, as such this industry will be the biggest user of cotton provided the quality is suitable for making the standard yarn which in turn will produce quality fabrics.

It is estimated that around 30 million kilograms of cotton knit fabrics in 20 count, 30 count and 40 count are being currently imported annually to meet the requirements of the export oriented manufacturers. In addition, by using locally produced cotton our 'value added' content in the readymade garment will be maximum. The present government identified the garments sub-sector as a 'thrust sector' and maximum effort and energy are being put to develop the 'backward linkage' industries and availability of quality cotton locally will go a long way in achieving this goal of the government. Besides, when 'backward linkage' industries will be 'on stream' in the form of fabric supply industries the true impact (benefit) of the export oriented readymade garments industry will be felt in a wider scale by the whole nation.

An exporter of readymade garments