

Change in Afghanistan

The fall of Kabul to Mujahideen forces marks the end of 14 years of bitter war between the Soviet installed regime in Afghanistan and the guerillas waging a relentless battle to overthrow it. At this moment, one's first thought must indeed be to salute the Afghan fighters for their tenacity and bravery in fighting for their country's independence. Once again, we have the reaffirmation of the historical truth that no puppet regime of a foreign power can survive the onslaught of an indigenous freedom struggle, even if it hangs on for years or even for decades. Afghanistan was the last attempt of the former Soviet Union to gain a foothold in this region, the last battlefield in the power struggle between Washington and Moscow. Let us hope that we will never see "another Afghanistan" again anywhere in the world, with any power, big or small, trying the misadventure staged by Moscow in this unhappy, land-locked Asian country.

The end of the civil war between the Moscow-backed regime and the guerillas opens up new possibilities but also many harsh challenges for Afghanistan. Over past many months, with a lot of quiet talks going on for years, the United Nations had evolved a sensible plan, perhaps the best one in the circumstances, for putting the strife-torn country on the road to stability and progress. The plan provided for an interim administration that would organise a national election, a plan similar to the one now being tried in Cambodia. A special UN envoy, Benon Sevan, has been placed in Kabul to supervise the implementation of the plan.

Various Mujahideen factions and, for that matter, two of their principal backers, Pakistan and Iran, treated the UN plan with indifference, often bordering on rejection. The rapid collapse of the Najibullah regime raised hopes among guerilla factions that they could take over Kabul, which they have now done, and run the show on their own, with or without the UN plan.

Unfortunately, what lies ahead is anything but a smooth transition to some form of popular democracy, based on free and fair election as envisaged by the UN. Instead, the grim prospect is one of a bitter power struggle between two major Mujahideen factions, one led by hardliner fundamentalist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the other by Ahmed Shah Masood who, believing in a more liberal brand of Islam, controls much of northern and eastern parts of the country. Behind this power struggle lies the traditional tribal hostility between minority Uzbeks and the majority Pashtuns. Unless these rivalries are brought to an early end—here, Pakistan and Iran must play a constructive role, preferably jointly—the whole country can come apart, like ancient Afghanistan or modern Yugoslavia. It would never serve the cause of Islam if Iran chooses to fight for fundamentalism with the force of arms. There is of course some hope that with the pragmatic elements in Iran gaining strength under President Hashemi Rafsanjani, Tehran will adopt a constructive approach in support of a modern democratic system instead of a theocratic one. In such a situation, Pakistan should also use its good offices on the side of a national consensus, based on a liberal interpretation of Islam for Afghanistan. Otherwise, Iran and Pakistan together can do a lot of damage to this ill-fated neighbour of theirs, perhaps just as much as the Soviet Union did to this country for 14 years.

BR is Drifting

The current spell of drought, unmitigated by Saturday's apology of a rain, had on the same day a most unlikely offshoot. It is believed that high mid-day temperature in a parched up surrounding made a kilometre of rail tracks 'buckle' not far from Chittagong. The Paharika inter-city train was derailed when negotiating this 'buckled up' stretch causing nine bogies to slid off rails and about 50 passenger receive injuries of various degrees. The Dhaka-Chittagong direct rail communication was snapped as a result and the link is being maintained by an arrangement of transhipment starting at the Gunabati station.

We shudder at the thought of how bad an accident it could be, taking hundreds of lives. As things are, in terms of panic and shock, suffering and loss to passengers as well as setback to economy, this is quite a mishap and the blame of it all must go to rail people for not caring to know the possibility of such buckling and take remedial measures beforehand.

We must say that something must be very very wrong with the railways. Something fundamentally flawed like the 40 per cent systems loss of PDB or the Compulsory Primary Education Programme. It went in for spectaculars, perfectly in line with what autocrats and dictators prefer to dazzle a gullible constituency with eschewing what was best for the nation's as well as their own survival and prosperity. The Railways haven't since been able to come back to a people-oriented cost-effective enterprise. Overmanning and pervasive corruption are there to undo any attempt at making it a going concern. But is that all? Isn't there the problem of trying to gloss over those with impressive but misleading performances in selected areas adding a lot to the trouble?

While townspeople, specially of the big cities, were all quite enchanted with the fast and comfortable inter-city trains, what was happening elsewhere in the country—railwaywise? As fare escalation competed with plummeting revenue, the service of the railways took an abysmal dip all over the country outside of the main cities. And, as in all matters, the dumping ground of all your neglect and deprivation should be supplied by the northern districts—the so-called western zone for both the PDB and Railways.

Over there they run 124 trains daily with 51 very unreliable locomotives. The condition of the coaches beggar description and the schedules are there only in the books. As you sow, so you will reap. The utter lack of care in every department of the service there has resulted in reducing many of these trains into unabashed 'smuggling' locals and on the whole 60 per cent of train riders do not, in return of neglect, buy a ticket. The whole thing is coming off unstick and in its last throes of decline. But, sure enough, it wouldn't be let to die as surely as it would not be let to live.

No one state or private body is as rich as the Railways—going by assets, that is. There isn't a more miserable performer, a poorer loser than the Railways in spite of its assets and its limitless potentials in an overpopulated country. The BR is drifting without any sense of direction. Who can set it right? Right decisions basing on right policies. That may sound a tall order. But we have no other choice.

The Fifth JS Session: A Fiasco or Worse?

THE Fifth JS session of the Jatiya Sangsad, April 12-19, ended in a fiasco. It will not convey the whole truth. It will not convey the enormity of the failure, and the untold consequences the failure may entail.

Every body knew that it would be a short session. At the same time every body knew that it was not going to be an Eid Retention either. We have it on good authority (Mr. Mahfuzullah's From the Gallery, The Daily Star, April 13) that members came clad in white Kurta-Pajama reminiscent of the Eid recently celebrated, and the white held up an illusion of peace though the rumblings of the battle round the corner could be heard. Was the attire still white on the 19th, the day when the session was prologued? Perhaps not. On the 19th, the opposition members, who had boycotted the session, were not to be seen in the main hall, but the galleries were full.

It was a session wholly dominated by the Golam Azam issue. On March 26, the People's Court, true to the announcements made earlier, was held. The whole nation was agog to see what happened on that day. The organisers had worked hard and had rallied massive support for the event. As the crucial day approached, one could feel the wave of emotion that had been gener-

ated on the issue sweeping across the nation. It was no comforting news for the government. Some spokesmen had openly criticised the move for the trial, terming it as unconstitutional, an open challenge to the existing judicial system. The organisers didn't agree, and they quoted examples and precedents. The administration's efforts to frustrate the trial and the assembly in Suhrawardy Udyan failed. On the part of the police there was perhaps a failure of nerve at the last moment. Denial of the microphone and the erection of a proper data was all that the police did. At first trickling into the park, it soon became a flood, and the Udyan became a sea of humanity by the noon tide. If we are to believe what I have heard people say, there was something special about this crowd: the quality of the people coming was distinctly superior compared to the type of the people normally seen in largely attended meetings in the city, perhaps that explains the order and the discipline that marked the assembly. The trial was held, charges of war crimes committed by Golam Azam in 1971 were read out, witnesses deposed and the verdict—a sentence of death—pronounced, and this was endorsed by the mammoth gathering, roaring out their approval in one mighty voice.

No amount of jugglery of

words can convince any body that the trial was a child's play and can have no bearing on how the government chooses to dispose of the Golam Azam case.

To the credit of the government it must be said that they did not take the matter lightly. But, in their public pronouncements they continued to decry 'gana adalat' and the people's verdict. By way of meeting the pressure of public opinion, a grudging concession was made: a show cause notice was served on Golam Azam late in the night of March 23 mak-

the twentyfour appeared to be negotiable. At least that was the impression some newsmen got. At any rate, the case against the twentyfour has all the appearance of being a vindictive one, an act of spite. No body in Bangladesh believes, what the government would have him believe, that these people, Jahanara Imam amongst them, were conspiring to overthrow the government of Begum Khaleda Zia, or to subvert the state, or to take law in their own hands as far as the execution of the verdict is concerned. There was

main issue. Golam Azam's unauthorized stay here is an additional, if not a peripheral, matter for them, but, as for the government, this is about the only offence it would take cognizance of. Now, if this is a correct statement of the case, it reveals a very wide gap between the two perceptions. If true, there is only a fence between the official voice of BNP—which may not be the authentic voice of the party—and the position taken by Jamanat and a mountain separating the former from the whole opposition minus Jamanat.

Many observers, who are deeply disappointed by the non-performance of the fifth Sangsad in its fifth session, will see this cleavage as the rock on which the session foundered.

But, here too, there is a little paradox. On the floor of the house, the Treasury bench speakers did not speak the same language. On the question of war crimes, some of these speakers almost outdid the opposition speakers. Perhaps that showed the true feelings of the members. Still the difference between the government and the opposition on the modality of trial—trial under the ordinary law of the land and trial by a special tribunal—proved unbridgeable. Between the indignation expressed for war crimes com-

mitted in 1971, and the tame and conventional course proposed for the trial of the criminals, there is hardly any correspondence. In fact this almost brings into doubt the sincerity of the sentiments some of the Treasury bench speakers poured out in their speeches. Was it all honestly meant or was it playing to the gallery, both literally and figuratively? The galleries, we understand, were full to the capacity.

It is far from clear what the government has in mind about the Golam Azam issue. That phase when it made little of the public trial and the forces behind the public trial, is over. By putting Golam Azam behind the bar, it has conceded a tactical retreat. Before making further concessions, it wants to be sure that these will not accrue to the account of Awami League—a perfectly legitimate calculation, but a little far-fetched, and small-minded, considering the gravity of the issue at hand. By taking the issue from the House out into the open maidan, and by putting a wholly wrong construction on the public call for trial, by imputing imaginary motives to the leaders of the ongoing movement for trial, the leadership of BNP has, in a sense, precipitated a crisis. The nation wants the issue to be resolved not on the streets but in the Sangsad.

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

ing it answerable by 10 am the following day. Golam Azam promptly complied. But a similar show cause notice was also served on twentyfour people, Jahanara Imam heading the list, bringing grave charges against them. But for the intervention of some of the leading lawyers of the country who took the case straight to the High Court, these twentyfour citizens would now be behind the bars.

The case against the twentyfour is still there. At the time the Sangsad was in session, and when the Treasury bench and the opposition were busy negotiating a compromise formula on the Golam Azam issue, the pending case against

nothing conspiratorial about the whole procedure adopted by the Ghatok-Dalal Nirmul Committee. It was as open and transparent as a thing of this nature could be. By instituting a case against some of the leaders of the trial, the government made it plain that the accusers in its eyes were worse offenders than the accused.

One good thing to come out of the Golam Azam case is that it has removed quite a few of the doubts befuddling our politics. For instance, for at least a section of the government party, the war crimes allegedly committed by the accused is a non-issue whereas, for the parties of public trial, that is the

UN Arms Register is Mere Window Dressing

Elvi Ruottinen writes from the United Nations

The Gulf War gave a \$40 billion boost to lagging American arms sales. The UN wants to create an arms register to keep records of future sales and transfer of heavy weaponry. Nearly 90 per cent of the arms are sold to the Third World. The arms register, reports Gemini News Service, may not work to control the weapon sales because the five permanent Security Council members account for 70 per cent of the trade.

WHILE the post-Cold War world may be awash with weapons of mass destruction as before, the United Nations is trying to keep track of at least some of them—if member governments will let it.

Following the collapse of communism, some arms reduction announcements have been made in both East and West. The Gulf war actually gave a \$40 billion boost to lagging American arms sales. Those with the cash (like Saudi Arabia) or credits (like Israel) are stocking up on the latest high-tech weapons demonstrated in the skies above Baghdad with brutal success. Yet even the arms-exporting governments have agreed to let the UN keep records of future sales and the transfer of some heavy weaponry.

In April a new UN computer acquired for the purpose will be ready to make note of such sales as the member nations are willing to report. By April 1993 they are expected to report on the arms sales of the previous year. However, compliance is entirely voluntary.

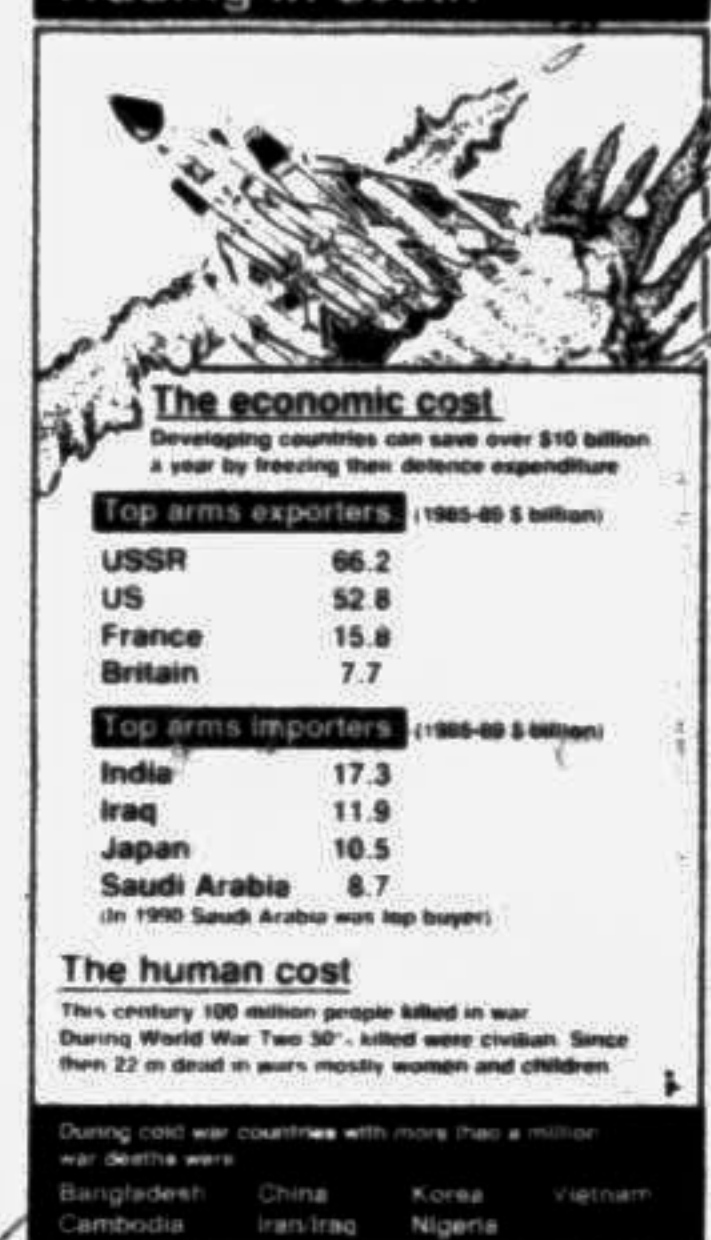
The General Assembly adopted the resolution to "promote transparency and openness in military matters as a confidence-building measure," with 150 countries voting in favour, none against and two—Cuba and Iraq—abstaining.

China, a major arms producer, refused to take part in the vote, although it participated in talks with the four other permanent Security Council members in Paris last summer on reducing arms exports to the Middle East.

There is little reason to believe, experts say, that major powers will limit arms transfers to any of their clients in the near future. United States President George Bush said as much.

In the Gorbachev years the

Trading in death



Soviet Union had an active swords-into-ploughshares conversion programme. In February came reports that President Boris Yeltsin might approve schemes to turn one of Russia's autonomous republics, Urdmusk, into an arms export centre to gain funds desperately needed to achieve the transition to a market economy.

The US, Britain, the former Soviet Union, France and China account for most of the global arms trade. The US Congressional Research Service says that in 1990 these five made \$37 billion worth of sales agreements with the developing countries. Nearly 90 per cent of the arms go to the Third World.

Pointing to the fact that the Council's Big Five had provided more than 80 per cent of Iraq's arms and 70 per cent of the world's total weapons sales, a reporter asked: "Isn't that a case of the fox guarding the chicken coop?"

Increasingly, arms-exporting countries are also selling the technology and the industrial capacity to make weapons.

These can then be turned by the buyers against the sellers, as happened in the Gulf war, where the US-led coalition's main players had armed Iraq.

The arms register "invites"—as the resolution puts it—governments to report annually their conventional weapons transfers in seven categories of heavy arms: tanks, armoured fighting vehicles, artillery pieces, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships and missiles.

UN Department of Disarmament officials call the arms register "a step in the right direction." Rolf Ekeus, of the UN Special Commission set up by the Security Council to oversee the elimination of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, advocates a permanent weapons enforcement agency for all countries.

He told a press conference: "The Security Council has all but neglected weapons throughout its history... the Council must supply itself with the means—as in the case of the Special Commission—to address weapons issues more aggressively and use the enormous power the UN Charter gives it."

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Ambassador Maj-Britt Theorin, a Swedish MP and former head of the Disarmament Commission, agrees.

He told representatives of non-governmental organisations and peace activists at the International Conference on the Global Arms Trade, meeting at the UN: "We can never accept that those five—governments to report annually their conventional weapons transfers in seven categories of heavy arms: tanks, armoured fighting vehicles, artillery pieces, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships and missiles."

Theorin's audience, meeting in a different room while the resolution was debated in the General Assembly, concurred.

The groups, from Europe, Latin America and Asia, had come together to launch an international citizens' information and communications network.

They were not satisfied with the arms register's limited aim merely to list such transactions governments were willing to disclose and

distrust the intentions of some governments even to take the list seriously. They pledged to monitor arms transfers in their areas and keep each other informed.

Their services were soon needed. The Security Council, unable to stop the flow of arms into Yugoslavia in violation of its own embargo, put out a call to the general public to inform it—in the strictest confidence—of any weapons shipments destined for Yugoslavia.

The confidentiality is thought to be less to protect the people doing their duty as concerned citizens than to avoid embarrassing the Security Council.

The Yugoslav embargo has been "leaking like a sieve"—in the words of the Secretary-General's Special Representative, former US Secretary of state Cyrus Vance. And most of the illegal arms are thought to be made by the Security Council's big five members. The origins of the arms reg-

ister idea in the UN system go back to its predecessor, the League of Nations. The short-lived League ran a weapons register for several years in the Twenties and Thirties, but to no effect on its member nations.

They managed to amass enough arms with which to slaughter some 20 million of their own and other nationals during World War Two.

In 1965, Malta proposed the revival of the register. Canada and the Nordic countries joined Malta in 1968 in sponsoring another initiative and in 1976 Japan gained support for a similar effort.

But it was not until former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's epoch-making speech at the UN in 1988, signalling a new era in international relations and also calling for the establishment of an arms register, that the idea for greater transparency in military affairs took hold again.

UN officials hope that member nations this time around take the lessons of history seriously. Many feel governments could better use their resources to deal with the enormous economic and ecological challenges facing the world today.

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To the Editor

Stranded Pakistanis

Sir, Through the column of your esteemed daily I like to congratulate H.E. the High Commissioner of Pakistan in Bangladesh, Rabita Al-Alam-Al-Islami Dhaka and Professor Dr Shahidullah as well as the lone organisation of Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC) Bangladesh for the smooth, fair and sincere conducting of the survey of stranded Pakistanis throughout Bangladesh. As a matter of fact the High Commissioner of Pakistan and Rabita-Al-Alam-Al-Islami under the guidance of most qualified professor Dr Shahidullah did excellent job in conducting the survey work with a very qualified and honest team.

We now hope the repatriation will start before the end of the financial year i.e. June 1992 as promised and assured by the Prime Minister of Pakistan. An encouraging news in the Muslim World League Journal of Makkah, Saudi Arabia in January 1992 issue stated that on the Rabita Trust board decision 2000 families of stranded Pakistanis, i.e. some ten thousand persons, would be brought to Pakistan within the next few months. This may itself prove to be a source of strength and encouragement to all concerned. The board has purposely approved this "token" repatriation scheme as a gesture of commencement of the trust pro-

gramme and as a measure of confidence-building for the affected people.

Ash-Mohammed
Chief Convener of Citizens' Committee of Pakistanis
Stranded in Bangladesh/Dhaka.

Importance of English

Sir, There are hot debates on the air among the intellectuals, litterateurs and concerned authorities whether to retain English side by side with Bengali or to eliminate it. The decision and option lies with the government.

The importance of English cannot be ruled out because of its flexibility, richness, expressiveness and above all its palatability to all and sundry. It is the only language which is so widely spoken and understood across the world. That's why it is called the *lingua franca*. It is all the more important for an underdeveloped country like Bangladesh, because we have to keep pace with the day to day changing complexities in arts, sciences and politics etc. We must not be narrow-visioned about this case in view. On the other hand we have to broaden our outlook. We must be unbiased, realistic and guided by reasons rather than sentiment. Otherwise we may have to suffer a lot because we are in the threshold of development.

The importance of English is evident from another point

of view too, that those who can read and write English fluently are in a better position in society. That's why perhaps the elite of the society are imparting education to their wards in English. We don't want our promising youth to be deprived of higher education. As such the most striking point to retain English is that most of the books on medical science, engineering and technology, economics and politics are written in English.

There are also historical background which compel us to learn English. Before partition of the sub-continent Muslims of India were lagging behind in education, because they were prejudiced towards learning English. This caused untold suffering for them and stood as a stumbling block in the way of development for the Muslims of India. As a matter of fact it was wrong notion, misconception and misinterpretation of the reality which our Holy Prophet (SM) himself had justified by saying "Go into China to seek knowledge". At that time Sir Syed Ahmed Khan rose to show the right path. He appraised and exhorted the Muslims that it was high time to learn English.

Last but not the least, we should accept all the good things which lead to development, of progress and prosperity.

Naushad Rahman
Dhaka

OPINION

Indian Settlers in the Philippines

Mr. S M Ali's beautiful column "My World" written on April 17 carries some factual errors about the Indian settlers in the Philippines due, perhaps, to the failure of his memory. The Indians and the Filipinos have been in trade transactions for centuries. The Muslims of Bengal were the attire of the sophisticated ruling class of Spanish origin, and no social festivities were complete without *Luce de Bengala* (fireworks of Bengal) in the 16th and 17th century Philippines. The Madras-Manila trade, popularly known as 'Manila trade' were carried mostly by British merchants under the guise of their Indian-based Armenian and few Indian dummies. Merchandise collected from different parts of the sub-continent were shipped from Madras port to be delivered at Manila, and from 18th century onward goods collected from Bengal, especially the Muslin and other textile products were loaded directly from Chittagong port. Hence it was not unlikely that a small number of Indian traders started settling in the Philippines hundreds of years ago.

However, the first officially recorded settlement of the Indians took place during 1762-64 when the East India Company occupied Manila with 2390 combatant personnel, including 640 sepoys recruited from south India. It is worth noting that the British embassy in the Philippines remained standing for over two centuries at the spot on the shore of Manila Bay which was chosen as the landing ground of the British invading forces in September 1762. Although the British ultimately withdrew its two-year seizure of Manila, nearly two hundred Indian soldiers preferred to stay back. They settled in Cainta, a suburb of Manila. Despite inter-ethnic marriages during the last two centuries the Indian

features of these people are still very prominent. They in particular and the sub-continents in general are called Bombal(s) and not Bombal as mentioned by Mr. Ali. The word originated from then popularly known Indian port, Bombay. Although engaged in small retail trade, one of the largest super-markets in Manila's posh Makati commercial district in the early seventies was owned by Asadas, a second generation Indian settler, while Raman Bagatsing, another second generation Indian, was the Mayor of Manila in the seventies and one of the key political personalities in the country. So, it is not true that the Indians migrated to the Philippines towards the end of the Second World War as told by Mr. Ali.

But it is true that unlike their counterparts in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand the Indian immigrants in the Philippines are now almost a dying breed. Perhaps the geographical proximity with India and religio-cultural predominance of Indians for thousands of years in Indonesia, Thailand and franco-pheasian countries have given them an edge over their Filipino counterparts. Although the southern area of the Philippines was a part of Indonesia's Sree Vijaya Kingdom (The Visaya region of the Philippines had its origin from Sree Vijaya Kingdom), India's religio-cultural and hence commercial influence was not direct over the Philippines as it was in the countries mentioned above. Besides, the Spanish colonial rulers in the Philippines neither encouraged any religious group, other than the Catholics, to have a strong foothold in the country, nor they officially patronized any trading between the Philippines and the British colonies. The Spaniards always considered the presence of the Europeans in

general and the British in particular in southeast Asia a threat to their policy of colonial expansionism, as Spain and England were often at war during the 18th century. As a result the Indians, having been deprived of government patronage in trade and commerce within the country, survived either on small retail business or on ordinary jobs. As such the Indians, not to speak of the Muslims in the south, were always looked down upon by the Spanish rulers and clerics alike and this attitude towards the Indians still prevails in the Filipino psyche. The long-drawn religious rivalries between the Muslims and the Christians in Spain had been dragged in the Philippines by the Spaniards who considered the Muslims in the Philippines as their arch rival, and the same psyche still works in the minds of the majority Filipinos.

This is not so in the case of the Chinese community. When the Spaniards occupied the Philippines during the middle of the 16th century they found a big Chinese business community settled throughout the country. Besides, China, then a regional superpower, was not too distant a place to be snubbed by the Spaniards. Yet during nearly four hundreds years of Spanish rule, the Chinese were persecuted time and again to safeguard the economic interest of the Spanish ruling class. But the indomitable Chinese survived the onslaughts and eventually became a very powerful economic and political force in the Philippines society.

I would like to request Mr. Ali to write more on southeast Asia as he is considered to be the lone Bangladeshi journalist to have worked and closely watched the socio-political issues of the region.

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Ranir Dighi Southeast Comilla