

Dhaka, Thursday, April 30, 1992

Dhaka-Yangon Treaty

The signing of an agreement between Bangladesh and Myanmar on the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees is no doubt a positive development. That the process of real repatriation will begin not later than May 15 indicates both sides' eagerness to get out of the bilateral imbroglio soon. Bangladesh is interested to see that the refugees leave without further souring relations between the two neighbouring countries. Myanmar, on the other hand, is intent on having the international pressure off from it. The third party i.e. the refugees themselves, however, are hardly involved in the process of arriving at the decision.

It is precisely for this reason that the treaty signed between the two countries leaves a lot of gaping holes, albeit its various merits. So the achievement until now should better be considered a welcome first step to a long process yet to be realised. That the accord has not adequately addressed the central point in the whole issue is crystal clear. An accord signed last November seeking the repatriation of the Rohingyas finally came to nothing and even before that the 1978 agreement failed to protect the rights of the Rohingya Muslims.

A law passed by the Myanmar regime in 1982 has deprived these ethnic minorities in Myanmar of their citizenship and all the problems are an offshoot of this irrational move. This treaty has never really sought to address that outstanding issue. So the refugees themselves may not be particularly enthusiastic about returning home without a definite guarantee that they would not be subjected to repression like they were being done before fleeing their country. As for the involvement of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the process of repatriation, there is a lot of confusion about it.

That this UN agency's active involvement in the process was most necessary cannot be denied. As a neutral body it was rightly placed to see for itself the prevailing security situation in places from where the Rohingyas were driven out. It is not easy to work out the procedures of resettling the returning Rohingyas in their homeland. But then it is possible to monitor if the Myanmar government goes on with a serious programme to accomplish the business.

Surely, this point has been grossly overlooked. Despite all the promises, one lurking fear that the repression of the ethnic minorities in Myanmar will continue cannot be so easily dispelled. So the need for ensuring security along with political rights for the Rohingyas should have been the primary concern for all the parties involved. If past experiences are any guide, that guarantee looks quite suspect. So the international pressure which seemed to have provided the right kind of leverage in Myanmar's conceding to the Bangladesh demand so soon has to be kept building up instead of its dissipation. Only then the initial success of Bangladesh's diplomacy will stand to bring about the desired result.

Even before coming to the long-time measures, some intricate problems facing the two sides have the potential to undo much of the good works done so far. For example, the problem of the verification of the list of the Rohingyas submitted by Bangladesh will be quite big if not insurmountable. To do that job an understanding between the two sides will prove to be the focal point. But still then a mediation, preferably by the UNHCR, will be very effective. Similarly, the monitoring of the safe return of the first batch of refugees and then their rehabilitation by the same UN agency can create the right kind of confidence-building climate for the rest of the refugees to follow suit. In this respect, since Bangladesh and Myanmar have diplomatic relations, the UNHCR can be well supported by the presence of an unofficial Bangladesh delegation.

We would like to take the opportunity to note that the world today is looking forward to coming to terms instead of parting ways. For both Bangladesh and Myanmar that lesson should not go amiss. They have begun the process and could shape it into a satisfying solution. But the Yangon government must come to realise that other existing ethnic problems along with the one of Rohingyas have also to be addressed for their speedy solution.

Rouble Trouble

The rouble is "despised" in the land of its birth, or so a news agency report published in this paper yesterday said. The report pointed out that in the recently-established independent state of Russia, people who can spend nothing other than the country's own currency are definitely at a disadvantage. They cannot dine at the best restaurants, nor shop at the best shops. In fact, the ordinary Russian cannot expect anything "best" in Russia unless he has the best currency with which to pay for it. That best currency is the US dollar, that symbol of 'world repression' and 'neo-colonialist exploitation' against which Soviet politicians and military theoreticians dedicated their lives for over seven decades before Boris Yeltsin last year dismantled the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Of course, the Russian people's love for the dollar is nothing new. Under the communist system too, all states of Eastern Europe operated special hard currency shops which sold high quality imported goods in exchange for Western currencies, and black market trade in dollars flourished from Leningrad to Bucharest. But now the dollar economy seems to have come out of its shade into the open, with even schoolchildren openly expressing "ambitions" to be dollar-earners — even through prostitution!

The poor state of the rouble is no more or less than a reflection of the health of the Russian economy itself. That should be of greater concern to the leaders of Europe than what the shoppers or hotel-goers might say. With Europe striving hard to have a unified currency for the continent, it must be a major headache as to what to do with the rouble which can't seem to command public respect or confidence even in its own country. For Boris Yeltsin though, the message from the marketplace is something he ought to take very seriously. As long as Russians hunt dollars and look upon the rouble with contempt, Yeltsin's sprawling empire will remain on the verge of economic collapse and social disintegration. The West too should do its bit to strengthen the rouble, for the sake of European stability, if not for Russia's sake alone.

Towards Adult Literacy Through Primary Schooling

by Cole P Dodge

THE constitution of Bangladesh, the Act of Parliament for Compulsory Primary Education, the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and the United Nations World Summit for Children Declaration all call for primary schooling for all children. Bangladesh has endorsed all these and set high goals for the 1990s. The question is how to achieve Education For All by the 21st century?

The population pyramid of Bangladesh shows that 55% of people are under the age of 20. They become the adults of tomorrow and unless these, the children of today, attend primary school, they will become illiterate adults of tomorrow.

The formal education system is not adequate to deal with the demands of universal primary education. Already between 60 and 75% of children enrol in government schools. With this good enrollment the focus must be given to attendance and completion. Why? Because only 50% of these children, on average attend class and only 35% complete the five year cycle of primary education. Therefore very special attention, very special programmes and a very special emphasis must be given to the regular attendance and then school completion of children currently enrolled.

Looking at Attendance and Completion the main thrust should be on learning achievement within all educational systems. However, there is one problem: the number of hours which teachers spend teaching. Comparisons between the major countries of Asia reveal that the children of

China receive three times more hours of instruction in the classroom than the children of Bangladesh. Chinese families have fewer children and yet society places a very high value on their education.

But educational experts tell us that the 440 hours of classroom time which Bangladeshi children receive each year is sufficient to teach the basics of primary education if the teachers teach for the full time. But studies have shown that teachers do not spend the entire 440 hours teaching. A time breakdown of a typical first period 35-minute class for primary schools shows us that five minutes are taken up with roll call, five minutes by teachers moving from class to class, a further fifteen minutes are spent checking the homework assigned the day before — which leaves only ten minutes for teaching.

Each parent has helped their own children with their homework. However, we are able to help our children because we are educated and yet two thirds of adults in

Bangladesh are illiterate. Therefore we must ask ourselves how children of illiterate parents can learn when so little time is spent teaching and when so much emphasis is placed on homework? Wouldn't children do better if they learned and did their homework in school? Perhaps this is related to the high drop-out rate?

The high drop-out rate poses an interesting set of questions. On the one hand we might conclude that the children of Bangladesh are less intelligent, less capable and therefore do not do well in schooling and drop-out. But this is clearly not the case when we look at those very drop-outs who have been enrolled in non-formal schools. Consider their performance: 98% attend, 96% complete. The daily course work is done entirely in the classroom. There is no homework. This is evidence enough for me to conclude that Bangladeshi children are indeed intelligent and bright and capable.

Congratulations are due to the government on its commitment to Education For All, signing the United Nations World Summit for Children Declaration, for ratifying and putting into law the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and for passing the Compulsory Primary Education Act and introducing CPE in 1992.

These indicate a very strong commitment at the political and administrative levels to Compulsory Primary Education. However, there is a big challenge to bring all children into school and give at least 80% three years worth of primary schooling.

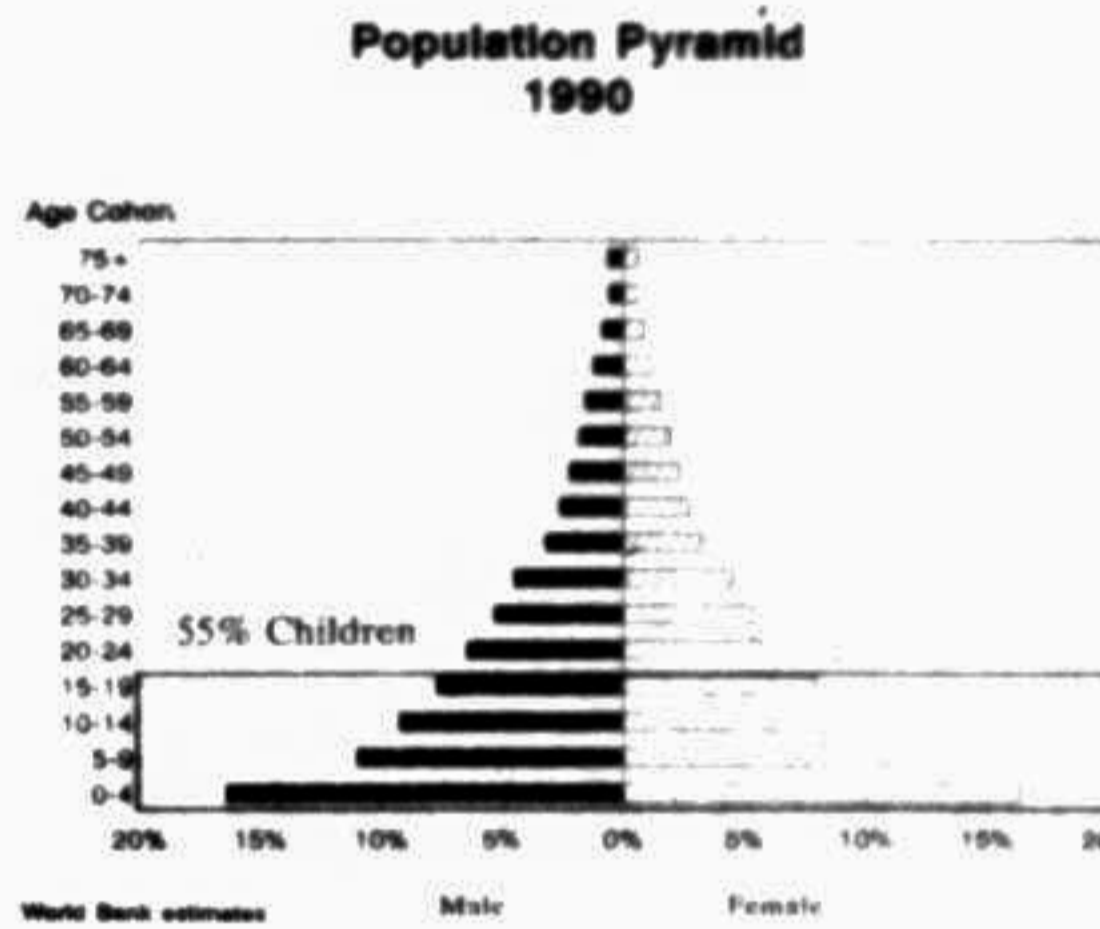
How we can reach Education For All by the year 2007 is there a precedent for optimism? Yes — Universal Child Immunisation has reached well over 80% of all newborns in 1990 and again in 1991, from less than 5% in 1985. The experience in the UCI drive suggests that the Ministry of Education requires many partners to achieve their

gigantic goal. The Ministry of Health was only able to vaccinate 40% of newborns by themselves up to 1988. Then they look on many partners, not only within government ranging from the Cabinet Division, the Ministry of Education, Local Government, Women's Affairs, Social Welfare, Youth and Information but also many non-government organisations, professional bodies and service groups. Every one combined to work hard to achieve UCI.

So the experience of UCI in Bangladesh suggests that the Ministry of Education should look for the natural partners who are already engaged in education, out of their commitment to education. The biggest group are the Islamic Schools: the Makhtabs and Madrasas who reach almost one out of every five children. Many children who drop-out of school are enrolled in an Islamic school.

Some people point to poverty as the main reason children drop-out of the school and yet I have never

Time on Task In Schools in Bangladesh



found a mother and father of a six-year-old girl in Bangladesh who said that they did not want their daughter to receive an education. Indeed, one of the reasons why between 60 and 75% of children enrol in school in the first place is because education of children in seen as an escape from poverty by poor parents.

We can pull together many partners to achieve and alliance for basic education. Social mobilisation can be done best by the non-governmental and by social service organisations as well as people engaged in communication. If Bangladesh is to achieve Universal Basic Education and have mass literacy by the 21st century then it is imperative that the children of today become literate adults of tomorrow.

On priority as identified by government, clearly must be on primary schooling. Demographers calculate that if there is no change in qualitative performance of primary schools, in other words if the trends of today continue until the next century, then there will be an absolute decline in the number of adults who are able to read and write. We will see a decline from one third to about a quarter of adults who are literate. On the other hand, if 80% of children today, in this decade and into the next century, complete primary schooling, then 75% of adults will be literate in the next century. The priority on the primary schooling for the largest demographic group in society today — the children — will assure adult literacy tomorrow.

The writer is UNICEF Representative in Bangladesh.

Russians Queue up to Live in South Africa

Charles Quist Adade writes from St Petersburg

Thousands of Russians want to emigrate to South Africa. Russia and the Baltic states are sending missions to Pretoria and the South Africans are in full diplomatic relations with Moscow after a break of nearly 40 years. Meantime, reports Gemini News Service, relations seem better with de Klerk than they are with Nelson Mandela.

TEN thousand citizens of the former Soviet Union are ready to emigrate to South Africa. The first 2,500 are reported to have had their documents processed and expect to fly off soon.

The independent weekly Chas Pik says a joint South Africa-Hungarian firm called Giperion, which recruits Hungarian, Romanian and Russian specialists to work in South Africa, has opened offices in the three Baltic states and St Petersburg.

When South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha made his first tour of the ex-Soviet Union last November, leaders of ethnic Russians in Estonia asked him to open the doors to people being discriminated against by the Estonians.

Botha was said to be receptive. The white minority regime in South Africa has always sought to increase the white population. The ex-Soviet Union is fertile ground. Many Russians are itching to flee their country.

President F W de Klerk was to have visited Moscow by now, but his trip has been delayed because of the referendum campaign in South Africa. A visit by Nelson Mandela of the African National Congress (ANC) has also been postponed.

Originally, the Russians had

wanted Mandela before de Klerk, but Mandela had already planned a visit to the United States. Soviet-ANC relations have been at a low ebb for some time.

Moscow gave Mandela's release in 1990 a lukewarm reception. Adverse newspaper articles about the ANC called for an end to Soviet help. During the Gorbachev era Soviet officials made numerous visits to South Africa without consulting the ANC and this further strained relations.

ANC insiders in Moscow said, however, that when Mandela was freed the former Soviet Union was to have been the first country on his visiting list because "the Soviet Union, more than any other country outside Africa, contributed to Mandela's release."

Yet two years later he still has not gone. The Moscow Nizavsimaya Gazeta accused Mandela of deliberately making the visit impossible, author Vladimir Tikhomirov, of the

Moscow-based Africa Institute, claimed that instead of visiting Moscow Mandela decided to stay longer in the US because he "had made new friends who would shower dollars on him."

The ANC mission in Moscow said there was not a grain of truth in all that. It said Mandela had twice put in his diary a visit to the Soviet Union as part of his foreign tours, but that "either no confirmation was received or confirmation came too late."

African diplomats say Gorbachev was playing a Western card. They suggest he decided not to receive the ANC leader before the Group of Seven (G-7) summit in London last summer lest the West should use continuing Kremlin support for the ANC as an excuse to run down Gorbachev's request to attend the summit.

They say that at that time the West aimed to destroy the ANC and pave the way for a two-party post-apartheid South Africa with de Klerk's Nationalist party and Chief

Buthlez's Inkatha Movement. Margaret Thatcher is believed to have brought a message to this effect to Gorbachev when she stopped over in Moscow in May 1991 on her way home from Pretoria, where she had been honoured for supporting the white minority regime.

The ANC says Mandela had not intended to go to Moscow to ask for money — "he only wanted to express his gratitude to the Soviet people and government in person for their assistance" while he was in prison.

The growing anti-African hysteria in what used to be the Soviet Union over the past four years may also have given the Moscow leaders cause for caution. The possibility of Soviet nationalists organising anti-ANC demonstrations during Mandela's visit cannot be ruled out.

The ANC Moscow mission says the ANC flag has three times been torn. Its Russian

secretary and driver have been threatened and threatening letters have been sent to the mission. One posted in St Petersburg hurried racist insults at the ANC and asked it "to go away to Africa."

The threats began after Soviet press articles had attacked the ANC, questioning the wisdom of a broke country continuing to support what was variously described as a "terrorist" organisation and the "richest" liberation movement in the world.

The ANC does not want to make an issue of these matters. It says Mandela prefers to sit down in Moscow and thrash out differences with old friends.

Meantime, Botha came back to Pretoria with a full sack — agreement to the opening of a South African consulate in Moscow and trade and commercial centres in the Baltic states, the Ukraine and St Petersburg. Although the visit was called private, he was given top treatment and saw many leading figures.

The Ukraine, the Russian Federation and the three Baltic states all said they would soon establish full diplomatic relations. Full relations with Moscow were cut in 1956, although economic links were partially retained. The two countries collaborated secretly in marketing gold and espe-

cially diamonds in spite of sanctions.

Now the question is: Will Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin do what Gorbachev was unwilling to do by inviting Mandela to Russia after all? Who will Yeltsin invite first — de Klerk or Mandela?

The foreign policy of the Russian Federation is in an embryonic stage. Its African policy is undefined and confused. Judging from the condescending attitude adopted by Russia's ruling democrats, Yeltsin may be in no hurry to invite Mandela.

The new Kremlin seems less interested in the ANC than it is in the white-dominated regime in Pretoria. It does not appear concerned about the prospects of majority rule under the leadership of a black president in the near future.

To many Russians it is business now with the white minority, with whom they claim historical links dating to the Anglo-Boer war when Russians fought alongside Boers.

A recent newspaper article said Russia's new democrats seemed to want to "throw both the baby and the bath water away." Yet, said the writer, "the ANC will play an influential role in post-apartheid South Africa, issuing export and import licences."

And soon, it was pointed out, "the south African Foreign Ministry is likely to be headed by a black and South Africa's future ambassador to Russia will be black, too."

CHARLES QUIST ADADE is a Ghanaian journalist, currently completing his PhD at St Petersburg University.

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.

Tribute to Satyajit Ray

Sir, I want to express the true feelings of a school student at the sad demise of Satyajit Ray. Today the whole world mourns his death. We will always remember him with fond memories for his immortal creations which depicted lives of the people in both rural and urban Bengal. Bangladesh will always remember this legendary Bengali film maker who became the first to receive the Oscar award. After Rabindranath and Nazrul, Satyajit Ray was unquestionably the greatest creative genius having multiple talents. It was a pity that Bangladesh was officially not represented at Ray's funeral on Friday.

Adib Reza Paribagh House, Dhaka.

"It hurts"

Sir, This refers to the letter by Mr Ahmed Ghani which appeared in your esteemed column under the above caption (April 17). I feel grateful to Mr Ghani for bringing to public notice a burning issue of great significance for our ailing economy. At a time when load-shedding has become an order of the day, it is indeed an ironically painful sight to see fuel-appreciating and costly street

lights blinking in broad day light. Can you imagine how many thousands of watts of electricity are being wasted by the negligence of the 'hurt-proof' people manning the helm of affairs? And this is happening when our children cannot even study due to load-shedding! Are we a nation with a dead conscience?

Through your column I humbly urge our Prime Minister to personally intervene and bring an end to such wasteful games.

Vox populi Dhaka.

Padrishibpur embankment: An appeal

Sir, Bangladesh won democracy after nine years of autocratic rule of the previous Ershad government. This democratic government has brought a lot of changes in the administration and has tried to detect the illegal activities of the past government in order to bring peace and harmony.

But there are still things going on which were started during the last decade when political people did things which benefited only a small group of people and brought destruction to countless others.

Such a thing is occurring in Padrishibpur and four other villages in Padrishibpur Union No 13 under Bakergonj PS of Barisal district. Padrishibpur, is pre-dominantly Christian (Catholic) having a primary and a high school for boys and girls, a health care centre, boarding houses for boys and girls. It was named after the Portuguese missionaries who came there some 300 years ago. There stands a historical church founded in 1764 with graveyard and a big mission compound. There are mosques, temples, a bank, one post office, cooperative societies and vast paddy fields. Padrishibpur Union has a total population of 11,000 in 1,540 families out of which 1,200 are Christian who are in a peaceful co-existence and harmony for many years.

The thing is an embankment construction under the World Food Programme (WFP) project No-39500. Padrishibpur canal digging project was passed during the autocratic Ershad regime covering an area of 5,595 km (1,430 hectares). Total expenditure of this project is Tk 1 crore 41 lakh. Reliable sources allege that the former President okayed the said project to please his ministers and companies. The local inhabitants said that the project was surveyed by the Water Development Board, Barisal without their knowledge.

People never felt the need of this embankment because (1) except for periodical cyclones, the area was never flooded as far as the history of this region goes; (2) the area at no time of the year is water-logged and never experienced salinity in

water and soil; (3) the area does not face draught situation except for late rains; (4) the natural calamities have hardly hindered agriculture in this region; (5) total ecology will be destroyed by this embankment construction in Padrishibpur which is about 80 km far from the Bay of Bengal.

From the very beginning the people of Padrishibpur Union strongly opposed the embankment project. They appealed to the local MP, Executive Engineer, WAPDA, Barisal, the Prime Minister, concerned ministers, government officials, donor agency but to no effect up to now. An appeal case was filed with Assistant Judge's Court Bakergonj for an injunction which was granted and served on 23/2/92 against UNO, Project Implementors and Water Development Board, but the injunction was defied by the project people.

The embankment in Padrishibpur is considered uncalled for by the local people, and it has caused severe damage and destruction to homesteads and environment and it is a gross violation of human rights.

This will displace people, destroy cultivable lands and many will face extreme misery in near future. Therefore the people under this project appeal and draw the kind attention of the concerned authorities and donor agencies to consider the gravity of the situation.

Plus D'Costa Commission for Justice and Peace, Dhaka

OPINION Development Communication

Shahabuddin Mahtab

Ms Rahat Fahmida had interviewed Mr Khairul Bashar, and the latter had informed her that although Bangladesh had innumerable NGOs, none of them related to development communication (The Daily Star: Dhaka Day by Day dt. April 10th).

Development Communication Planning is such a pervasive and vital subject that it should be the concern of all government agencies, all the NGOs and the media as it is linked up with all the processes of planning and decision-making and the ultimate execution of a project, and its beneficiaries. The people's needs and aspirations are kept out of the communication process, as a result of which their motivation and participation is not there.

The social environment in which we live in Bangladesh today is a difficult one. The different social groups, classes and interests are so well organised that an easy flow of communication and understanding would appear to be a formidable task. The elite groups of society, in whichever area they are working have a definite role to play, if the country has to achieve its

are very near to it.