

Dhaka, Monday, May 4, 1992

US and Environment

Nothing would be more damaging for the global protection of environment and, for that matter, for the success of the Earth Summit scheduled next month in Brazil than for the United States and developing nations to get into an adverse relationship. Unfortunately, this seems to be happening in two different settings.

In Kuala Lumpur where the second Ministerial Conference of Developing Countries on Environment and Development has just ended, the United States has rejected the setting up of a new fund for this purpose, as proposed by the conference, saying it preferred to work through the existing mechanism, such as the Global Environmental Facility (GEF). This mechanism, operated by the World Bank, with funds provided by industrialised countries, dispenses support for sustainable development for the Third World. The position taken by the Kuala Lumpur meeting is that GEF would be inadequate to underwrite any action plan that might be adopted by the Earth Summit in Brazil. In this sense, some would say, the Earth Summit would only be a conference — perhaps a grand conference — without producing a practical mechanism that can be put into effect.

Meanwhile, at a conference in Paris, the United States has refused to join the rest of the industrialised west in accepting a treaty commitment to stabilise the emission of "greenhouse gases" at 1990 levels by the year 2000. On this subject, Washington's position is that the pledge is unnecessary, since its own national programme, now in force, has started achieving "satisfactory" results. This position is challenged by several other industrialised countries, the UN experts and, of course, the Third World.

These developments cast a shadow over prospects of the Earth Summit. Unless Washington changes its views on the two issues — namely, on the creation of a new fund for environment and development and on the acceptance of a treaty commitment on the release of gases which damage the ozone layer — its moral position will be just indefensible as its political one. After all, rich nations currently provide about 0.3 per cent of their GNP, on average, amounting to \$ 50 billion a year as Official Development Assistance (ODA), when debt-ridden Third World countries are forced to pay a great deal more to developed nations only as interest on their loans.

Whatever differences have cropped up between some developing countries, led by Malaysia, and industrialised nations at the Kuala Lumpur conference, over the causes of pollution and the sovereign rights of Third World countries to conserve and manage their own forest resources, the issues involved must indeed be treated as global concerns. It is no longer the question of any superpower assuming leadership in this "do or die" battle for the planet. It is now very much a matter of reaching a broad-based consensus involving all nations.

Herein lies a challenge facing the United Nations — most certainly its Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali — to make the Earth Summit a success. Having won a measure of credibility with the United States as well as with other nations, rich and poor, the Secretary General must treat it as a matter of the highest priority. Instead of arranging yet another pre-Rio summit-style conference, Dr Ghali must hold private and candid talks with leaders who hold the key to the success of the Brazil meeting. If the Egyptian-born diplomat cannot produce a consensus through these informal consultations, he should not look forward to the summit in Brazil with any measure of optimism.

Promoting Quality Films

While inaugurating the week-long Japanese film festival last Friday the Information Minister Mr Nazmul Huda said that the government may soon revive the practice of extending financial grants for production of quality films. There are two ways of reacting to such policies of the government. The first is to welcome it wholeheartedly. Given the nature of the market and the obvious dearth of discriminating audience, some sort of official support for art films is necessary. The second is to be a bit hesitant, prompted mainly by our experience of official support behind creative work, which seldom comes without a price tag. While we fully appreciate the Information Minister's intentions which, we are all certain, are well above board, the possibility cannot be overlooked that official financing may well go against the artistic independence of the quality film producers.

So why not follow another route to reach the same goal. We would like to suggest that instead of the government itself dishing out funds to this or that film producer, it should create a fund or an endowment, which will receive money from the public exchequer but will be managed independently by the professionals — in this case the film producers themselves — or better still by a group of eminent artists, scholars, writers and, of course, producers of quality films.

A less independent body to fund creative endeavours may end up making our artists hostage in the hands of officialdom, subject to the political currents of the day. Political governments, however well intentioned, are under constant pressure to appease their supporters. In fact most often they have their very own groups among artists, writers and, of course, film producers. To avoid being under such pressures and to be able to genuinely help the creative artists in need of support, democratic governments elsewhere have found the policy of setting up endowments or independent funds — supervised in both cases by the parliament — as a useful means to promote creative art in all its branches. It could be another long term gain for democracy if we follow a similar policy in our case.

The Neon Lights of Prosperity Burn Bright

The economy is virtually stagnant. Per capita income has remained low at less than one-fifth of Thai income today — About one million persons survive on the income from the rickshaws in Dhaka. While we banned it from the Airport Road so that the road is clear for the VIPs to pass through, it simply vanished from economic pressure in Bangkok. This physical manifestation of growth is painfully lacking in Bangladesh.

I T was the evening with a difference. Unlike the hot and humid end of the day, the weather was unusually cool. Bangkok — the city of Angels — was enjoying the air-conditioned temperature of 72 degree Fahrenheit on that very rare December evening.

I was out for dinner with a friend from Dhaka. His first visit east of Chittagong or Sylhet. Hence there were amusements in his eyes. Only two hours flying time from Dhaka, yet the differences are so remarkable — so acutely glaring indeed, he said. Yes, it is true, the neon lights were bright, colourfully glowing everywhere, even from the vendor's trolleys selling noodle soup. It seemed to me, from poverty-stricken Bangladesh that these were the neon lights of prosperity — the newfound Asian prosperity along the Pacific Rim.

Bangkok during the last five years have become notorious for traffic congestions (apart from other notoriety). Good thing they have banned rickshaws here, my friend thought. But it is not correct. Rickshaws were never banned, it simply vanished. With more income and modernisation, there were rising pressure on time. People could not tolerate such slow-moving transport

while they could afford more cars. Every month 25,000 additional cars clog the streets of Bangkok. Moreover the city bus services are excellent. Taxis are available anywhere anytime. A very recent phenomenon has been the dwindling number of Tuk Tuks, the so-called Baby-taxis of Dhaka since taxis, all air-conditioned, are affordable practically by everybody at present. May be very soon, everybody like in the United States would own a car. To-day, one out of four families in Bangkok have access to private automobile. Taxis would then exist only for the tourists like you," I told my friend.

We were strolling up the sidewalk on our way to the restaurant for dinner. Given our Dhaka standards, it was not yet the time for the evening meal. It was fun time, in the midst of the Bangkokian glory of rising per capita income, the flood of tourists bringing in huge flow of dollars as well. It is vibrancy and bold optimism all around. We could vividly sense the neon lights of prosperity.

More so because we belong to the land of utter deprivation, of sordid evenings where low voltage lamps flicker against the darkness of cold December evenings. Very soon it may be all totally dark because of unpaid bills and system loss of the public sector power company. How can we

Therefore, while we banned it from the Airport Road so that the road is clear for the VIPs to pass through, it simply vanished from sheer economic pressure in Bangkok.

This is the physical manifestation of growth that is so painfully lacking in Bangladesh. More rickshaws and destitutes

home." What about the unemployment problem? "No, there will be no unemployment since everybody will be busy building his house."

We reached our intended place for dinner. It was crowded — no empty chair and the tables full of food: fried chicken and steaming soup from where the heads of large size shrimps were sticking out. The restaurant had three floors, all jam packed but we were lucky to find an empty table just vacated. The profusion of food is really staggering. On the third floor where we were seated, I counted at least 25 large fishes, each weighing 2 to 3 kg, being rapidly devoured by almost all local people. There were very few foreigners like us. I know from my long sojourn in this city that there are at least few thousand such eating places, big and small, and all of them are full of people and food at this hour of the night.

Overflow of food in the restaurants and of cars on the streets and everywhere recorded, sometimes in profusion of

bright colours, are the surest signs of prosperity. It is so provincial back home — so dull and dim. There is so much life here in this country because they produce in abundance and manufacture in plenty. While in Bangladesh, scarcity is the hallmark, an enlarging void of simply nothingness.

We were almost at the end of our dinner. The waitress brought us the Chinese tea. She smiled and asked, "You come from which country?" Without hesitating for a moment, I replied, "Bhukha (hungry) Bangladesh."

In the midst of all the neon lights of prosperity it seemed that we have remained holed up in the dark reaches of our mind for too long. Our inertia and prejudice, dogmatism and ignorance are constantly pushing us all the time to strike a compromise with our dismal state of life and we remain where we are — inside the black hole of tragedy.

A relation of mine who came to Bangkok for medical treatment made the following observation on the neon lights of prosperity: "Let them enjoy the prosperity born out of sin. It will be only temporary while in this world. We, for our sufferings, will be in Heaven and live happily ever after."

WINDOW ON ASIA

Shahed Latif

forget Dhaka. It is in our blood. Therefore the rising number of cars on the Silom Road of Bangkok only reminded us of the Dhaka streets clogged with rickshaws only.

The economy is virtually stagnant. Per capita income has remained low at less than one-fifth of Thai income today. It was almost half of that income in the early 1960's. About one million persons survive on the income from the rickshaws in Dhaka today.

mean reverse development. Eliminating them through regulations is simply throwing dirt under the carpet, naive or very simplistic attitudes toward very complex problems. It reminds one of the comic character from the American TV, Alf, who decided to run for the office of the American President and when the pressmen asked, "what will you do with the homeless," his immediate reply was "everybody would build his own

China-Nepal Ties still Await General Thawing

Jan Sharma writes from Kathmandu

Although long handshakes and smiles were conspicuously missing, ties between Nepal and her powerful neighbour have been placed on a firm and business-like footing

an independent Tibet."

The Nepal side stated that it understood the position of the Chinese government and reiterated that "Nepal has always recognised that Tibet is an autonomous region of China."

Nepal also reaffirmed that it "had not allowed and would not allow Tibetans in Nepal to engage in any anti-China political activities in its soil."

The Tibetan issue is sensitive to the Chinese and to Nepal which provides home to several thousand Tibetans who fled their country after the Chinese takeover.

Kathmandu and Beijing signed an economic and technical cooperation agreement under which Beijing would

provide a US\$9 million grant and help construct a cancer hospital in Nepal.

The traditional Chinese enthusiasm for aid to Nepal is lacking because of Beijing's own vast needs. However, Chinese officials maintain that does not mean China's overall interest in Nepal will be one of benign neglect.

Most important than aid, the contacts between Chinese and Nepal's new democratic leaders have just been established.

"Let's not judge friendship in terms of money," Prime Minister Koirala told an airport press conference in Kathmandu soon after returning home from Beijing.

Some analysts link the visi-

ble absence of warmth in the Chinese reception to the Everest issue, highlighted by the Punar Jagaran, a weekly newspaper close to the ruling Nepal Congress party.

The weekly ripped open the long settled Sino-Nepal boundary question, including that bearing upon the sovereignty of Mt Everest.

"Will China return Mt Everest to Nepal?" the newspaper asked in its March 10 issue. It said the authoritarian regime overthrown in April 1990, "had given away half of Mt Everest and the Tingri plateau to China to seek the Chinese support for the (regime)."

The newspaper said the 1960 boundary treaty was signed by taking advantage of Nepal's political instability at that time, and called for a fresh demarcation of the Nepal-China boundary.

Hindu, a vernacular weekly, charged that such questions were being raised to "sabotage

Mr Koirala's China visit."

The first man to raise the Everest issue was Khadga Bahadur Budha, a member of the United People's Front, a radical left party.

Diplomats also noted the timing of the official visit of General S G Rodriguez, India's Chief of the Army Staff, to Nepal just before Mr Koirala's China visit.

In January, two Taiwanese delegations visited Kathmandu in what was seen by some as a marked departure from Nepal's traditional foreign policy opposed to a "two-China" concept.

In the state-owned vernacular daily, the Gorkhapatra, Congress MP Arjun Narasingh referred to the destruction of monasteries in Tibet, recalled the Dalai Lama's flight from Lhasa to India in 1959 and suggested that conditions be created to facilitate the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet.

—Depthnews Asia

Europe

Reborn Nations Exorcise Marxist Past

European ex-communist states are starting to realise that throwing out the totalitarian regimes in their countries is not equivalent to de-communisation. Anne Olson of IPS reports from Warsaw.



futed the charges, but said they were unable to defend themselves in the hysterical political climate.

While the ex-communist states share a totalitarian past, major differences existed among each country's communist regimes.

Poland's martial law period in the early 1980's, for instance, never came to the harshness of the Prague government before its sudden collapse in November 1989.

In a recent survey on expe-

riences of people in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary, only eight percent of respondents in Poland considered decommunisation a major necessity, while about 80 percent in Czechoslovakia favoured it.

Hungarian participants pointed instead to the problem of responsibility for crimes committed during the ill-fated 1956 uprising, when thousands died at the hands of Soviet troops called in to crush the revolt.

Only five such cases have been brought to trial, and the number is unlikely to exceed 100. One Hungarian said decommunisation was "an issue created by political elites", adding that his people were far more concerned with everyday problems.

In Poland, where the powerful influence of the Catholic church helped Poles create their own society within a weak regime, the concerns went back to abuses committed during the Stalinist period of the late 1940's and early 1950's.

Nevertheless, the Polish Interior Ministry is drafting a law that would weed out of public office Poles who collaborated with the secret police. The leading party in the ruling

coalition, the Centre Alliance, is the author of the decommunisation policy.

The measure is strongly opposed by the Democratic Left Alliance, Poland's reformed communists who have the second-largest caucus in Parliament.

Its leaders argue that Poland already has all the existing legislation needed to bring to account those deemed worthy of punishment for communist-era crimes, but has failed to use it.

"Decommunisation is very safe for the new power elites because they are directing popular aggression towards the power group that lost," said Janusz Reykowski, a professor who was one of the leading reformers in the last Polish Communist Politburo.

Samolir said many Poles do not think any special measures are needed. But for those who do, the problem is how to formulate measures within a legal system that is part of the communist legacy. None of the ex-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe has yet adopted a new body of law to govern its activities.

"The current state of law imposes very stringent conditions for punishing crimes of the past," Smolir said. "They impose limitations on what we can do to the communists. This is a transitory period where we don't yet have a new legal code. This creates a terribly complex problem."

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.

Session jam

Sir, A news in the paper of April 21 is heartening in the midst of gloom all around. The students of the new 1st year of BUET have demanded that their classes should start forthwith. They have passed their H Sc exam 2 years back and have remained away from classroom for 2 years! These are the best years in the life of a person, they are at their creative best in early 20s or late teens. But the wretched country is deprived of the fruits of the labour of our young people when the same is needed most. Apparently it is no matter of concern to anyone.

Moreover, the old fossils of the bureaucrats with vested interest seem to relish the situation when their own offsprings go for education abroad and try to settle down in a foreign country to live a decadent life of second class citizens. The so-called leaders are no different. The university teachers are also to be blamed for the situation in the universities. It appears that condition in BUET is deteriorating continuously after the departure of Dr M A Rashid from the scene. The selfless dedication of the late teacher could create an institution of exemplary discipline and superb quality which is a far-off dream now.

Afghanistan

Sir, By the blessings of Almighty Allah and sacrifices of thousands of martyrs the freedom in Afghanistan is there. But it is a matter of regret and pain that yet the issue is not completely solved. The differences among the Mujahideen leaders in fact hurt all Muslim hearts around the world. It seems that we shall have to watch the civil war among the Mujahideen go on, which indeed may be a plan of alien external forces for the disintegration of Afghanistan.

It is a matter of great concern that why leaders of the Mujahideen, instead of shed-

ding their petty difference and thinking only about unity and establishment of an Islamic state — which was the main reason of all Mujahideen — should lock in a fratricidal conflict after the war against the autocrat is over.

It is advisable that to solve this conflict, Islamic leaders should come forward, especially that of Iran and Pakistan who both hosted millions of the Mujahideen, play an effective role in mitigating the difference among the Mujahideen factions.

It is also my appeal to the Afghan brethren that they should not forget the main principle that they are fighting for forty years i.e. the sovereignty of their country. Any mistake may be unforgivable by the Almighty Allah, the martyrs and their orphans and widows.

Sayed Rahim Ashnakhah
An Iranian student of BUET

Large enterprises

Sir, The public sector Machine Tools Factory of Pakistan is supplying a sugar mills machinery to BSFC while they earlier supplied the Natore Sugar mill. But the Bangladesh Machine Tools Factory is failing to pay the wage bill to employees regularly while its sale volume during 91-92 is far less than the compensation to employees. The above two news items were published in the local dailies in March '92.

The giant Machine Tools Factory was set up after liberation as we chanted slogans of disparity during Pakistani days. Besides, Karachi Shipyard is building ocean-going ships for Bangladesh Shipping Corporation while Chittagong Dry Dock is losing since its start up. A ship of 1000 DWT is yet to be built at Chittagong Dry Dock though it has a capacity to build ships of 16,000 DWT or so.

It is evident that our learned professors who played

a pioneering role in discovering disparities in respect of large industrial undertakings, became emotional after liberation as Planning Commission members might have allowed the blunder.

Let those planners of large enterprises do something real and concrete towards proper management as they perhaps envisaged while planning during 72-75 or so.

Sadiq Alee
Moghbaraz, Dhaka

Resolve problems

Sir, The people of the problem-ridden country voted the majority party to power to have better service from them. Hence each member of the Government is to take care of the problems, at least 60 pc of the total if not all, and resolve them. They have to be firm in action in favour of the majority of the people.

MA Motin Majumder
Survey of Bangladesh, Dhaka.