

Has ME Peace Process Moved Forward?

IF one looks at the ME peace talks in terms of number of rounds and the net results, then the peace process has hardly moved forward. Syrian chief negotiator was apparently right in saying that "we are not much further today, after six months from Madrid and five bilateral rounds, from where we were right at the start of the peace process." But the burden of frustrations becomes less when everything is seen in the context of Israelis and the Arabs — the arch enemies — who have at least been sitting across the table from time to time, though in a foreign country and under the instance and probably pressure of a foreign country, and discussing matters that may hopefully lead to "peace" one day.

After having got over the procedural matters the 5th round of peace talk that took place in Washington despite Israeli protest was expected to consider issues relating to Palestinian self-rule in the West Bank and Gaza. Each side, however, had different ideas about self-rule. Palestinians saw self-rule in terms of governing West Bank and Gaza by

themselves — by an elected Legislative Assembly — something short of an independent Palestinian state. But the Israelis totally rejected this. They, however, moved forward probably by a millimeter from "Garbage collection" self-rule — probably because of the ensuing Israeli election where Yitzhak Shamir wants to put up some show of his flexibility — to allowing Palestinians to administer hospitals and some other Palestinian establishments which they do any way and allowing some pilot elections in some municipalities.

The very idea of holding elections even in some municipalities may be termed as some progress as this sows the seed of Palestinians exercising their right and taking control of some areas of the occupied territories and as the peace process continues more areas may be included leading to Palestinian control of much of the areas of the occupied territories. One has to see this in the context of two difficult issues: (a) total Israeli fanaticism in terms of biblical Judea and Samaria — the land of Israel where only the Jews have the right to live; (b) the territories are actually occu-

pled by Israel — a military power that the Arabs can not fight.

Determined US Effort

However, it is also true that progress by millimeter cannot achieve the desired goal even in a century. Therefore, a determined effort must be made by the US — the principal sponsor of the peace talks. One

Bush because of the racial violence that devastated a good part of California and some other areas Bush Administration apparently remained firm on peace course and pursued the peace talk in Washington. It seems that Bush Administration wants to take the full advantage of the June election in Israel — probably the best chance to oust Shamir and his party. Without giving

ferent from Likud. If the US continues to work on the leadership of Labour Party, it is likely that Labour would put up a clear option or choice for the Israeli people with regard to their relationship with the Arabs in terms of freeze on settlement in the occupied territories and land for peace. Indeed, Shamir also made some gesture towards the Palestinians in the 5th round by offering some pilot elections in the occupied territories, which he thought might be well received by the Israeli people. He also ultimately realised that most of the Israeli people are now fed up with their fight with the Arab neighbours, which they cannot continue for all time to come. Thus there is a good opportunity for the US to have some sort of diplomatic manoeuvre during Israeli election on June 23.

Positive Arab Signal

Before June election, the Arabs also might do well by giving some sort of positive signal regarding recognition of Israel against its firm commitment on "Land for peace" with total Israeli withdrawal.

The role of the US in obtaining such Arab concession would be crucial provided it can get a firm commitment from Labour Party leadership on freeze on settlement and land for peace with total Israeli withdrawal. Labour Party must make these as election issues and try to get the verdict of the Israeli people on them. Once the Israeli people give their verdict in favour of peace, which is likely, peace negotiations will be far more easier and faster. There is no sense in allowing Shamir to continue to fiddle with matters like peace which he does not appear to believe in. If Shamir returns to power which seems unlikely, peace may remain unachievable.

In any case, peoples' verdict in favour of peace is absolutely essential as no government in power can negotiate peace and sign a peace accord involving so vital issues like people, land, statehood even in confederation, sharing natural resources etc. Therefore, Israeli election of June 23 appears extremely important from the point of view of peace in the region and further peace talks should await the results of the Israeli election.

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

Muslehuddin Ahmad

determined action was the refusal of the loan guarantees for \$10 billion for settling the Soviet Jews mainly in the occupied territories. This dealt a political blow to Prime Minister Shamir and his Likud party. The Israeli people got the US message alright and this might work well during June election in Israel. Some, however, thought that this refusal would cost President Bush dearly in the election year, but this does not seem to be the case.

Despite some political setback recently for President

any overt impression of political interference in Israeli election, the US may continue to project its long stated policy of "Freeze on Israeli settlement as it is an obstacle to peace" and "Land for peace" and thus make the Israeli people aware of the seriousness of the issues and ready for their decision. In Israel, the position of the Labour Party led by Y Robin appears to be somewhat nearer to the US position — "some land for peace," probably meaningful self-rule etc though in very different

EARTH SUMMIT-III

North Unwilling to Meet Some Southern Environment Demands

by Martin Khor

ONE of the stereotyped images about international relations on environment and development is that the North countries are interested in protecting the environment whilst the South is only interested in development and getting more aid, and indifferent to environmental issues.

At the preparatory meetings for the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), it is true that the South has been most vocal on its rights to control its natural resources, on receiving 'new and additional financial resources', on technology transfer on favourable terms, and on the need to give high priority to poverty eradication and to development.

However, besides making these 'development demands', the Group of 77 developing countries and China have also put forward several 'environmental demands', and fully tested the industrial countries' claims of being environmental champions. In many cases the North (or at least some of its member countries) failed the test.

At the New York preparatory committee (Prepcom) meeting for UNCED, Third World delegations played an active role in pushing for comprehensive international measures to curb the export of toxic chemicals and wastes, high lighting the potential environmental and safety risks associated with biotechnology, and called for changes in consumption habits to save resources.

This to some extent broke the stereotyped portrayal of

Southern countries exploded the myth that they were in-different to environmental concerns by advocating some strong environmental and safety measures. Some Northern countries resisted the demand on them to change lifestyles, prohibit toxic exports and control biotechnology hazards.

This is the final article in a special three-part series on UNCED by the author. The first and second parts were published day before yesterday and yesterday, respectively.

the South as having no interest in environmental issues.

For example, the G-77 and China sought to highlight unsustainable consumption patterns of the affluent as the major source of global environmental stress. They advocated the changing of consumption patterns that would cut excessive consumption whilst raising the poor's consumption of basic goods and services, and reduce wastage and use of finite resources in the production process.

The United States delegation shocked other delegates and the large contingent of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) present by denying that consumption patterns were related to environmental problems ('Our lifestyles are not up for negotiation,' President Bush had earlier declared); it proceeded to square-bracket (disagree with) the most important paragraphs of an already diluted chapter of Agenda 21 dealing with unsustainable consumption.

The implication of the refusal to deal with high consumption and lifestyles was quite clear: in a world of increasingly scarce and polluted resources, if the rich won't cut down on their consumption, the poor will have to have

their development and living standards further squeezed.

In another instance, the G-77-China proposed that the export of hazardous substances, projects and wastes be prohibited, and that this be written into the Rio Declaration itself.

The original G-77-China proposed principle stated that environmentally harmful activities and projects should not be transferred to other countries; that toxic substances and wastes should not be treated or disposed of abroad; traffic in toxic substances should be halted; and countries of origin or entities involved in such activities shall bear liability for compensation.

It should be noted that this is the most comprehensive and far-reaching set of proposals that developing countries as a group has put forward to deal with the trans-boundary export of toxics.

Moreover, it involves potential substantial economic loss to the proposers, since South countries could earn income from accepting toxic industries and wastes. For example, in African country had reportedly been offered a sum equivalent to twice its annual GNP to receive hazardous

waste, and eventually refused.

The G-77-China proposal was thus a clear move to choose to protect the environment and health of people in the South, even at the expense of short-term economic interests.

The G-77-China toxics proposal generated great enthusiasm from most of the NOOs present: a resolution by over 100 groups urged all governments to fully support the principle as this is one of the few proposals in UNCED that has so far inspired us.

However, Northern governments threw cold water on the proposal, with the US, the EC, Japan, Canada, Australia and Switzerland objecting to its inclusion in the Declaration as the subject could be dealt with in Agenda 21. With the G-77-China sticking to their position, the debates over this principle became one of the major bones of North-South contention in the Rio Declaration working group.

Eventually, the G-77-China had to accept a much watered-down version of the principle in the final declaration draft, that simply calls on states to cooperate to discourage or prevent the relocation and transfer to other states of ac-

tivities and substances that harm the environment of human health.

The North-South wrangle over hazardous exports was carried over to negotiations in the Agenda 21 chapter on management of toxic chemicals. Developing countries pushed for the establishment of international laws to prevent illegal international traffic in toxic and dangerous products but this was vehemently resisted by many Northern countries.

In a last-minute compromise, developed countries agreed to include a programme area to prevent illegal international traffic only on condition Agenda 21 does not call for 'international legal instruments and for effective monitoring, enforcement and imposition of penalties' that were originally proposed.

The Malaysian delegation, which had played a leading role in advocating legal control over illegal traffic in toxic and dangerous products, voiced its 'deep regret' for the reformulated basis for action. The language used is unbalanced, vague and lacks commitment in its approach, its spokesman, Tan Meng Leng, told the meeting.

The UN General Assembly, he noted, had passed resolu-

tions in the past acknowledging that such traffic is detrimental to health and the environment, particularly in developing countries. UNCED, he added, should be 'visionary' and it was regrettable that the Prepcom could not agree to make serious efforts to produce an international agreement on the matter.

In the Agenda 21 negotiations on biotechnology, the G-77-China supported a proposal for a code of conduct to oversee safety and environmental aspects of biotechnology experiments and applications.

Some Northern countries were also in favour of improving safety controls over biotechnology. However the United States sought to water down and dilute the references in the text to the need for safety measures, and opposed the establishment of a code of conduct, claiming that biotechnology was safe and thus such a code was unwarranted.

The above are some examples of how South countries have actively been pushing for tighter environment and safety measures within the UNCED process, and how some Northern countries have been resisting such measures.

The South should continue to propose more measures to improve the environment in its own countries as well as globally. Commitment to environmental protection is after all in the South's own interests. Making that commitment clear, without compromising on the need for appropriate forms of development, would further help dispel the image that the South only wants more aid. — *Third World Network Features*

Science for Development

In an ever-changing development perspective, the priorities for human and for that matter social development also change. Today's world is confronted with two most singular threats — environmental degradation and a disease called AIDS. The two are recent phenomena and have taken the centre stage with the threat of a nuclear war now receding in the distant horizon. No wonder that the priorities for development have suddenly changed. Contrary to popular belief, mankind's misery owes not so much to the scarcity of wealth but to the misplaced priorities often manoeuvred by biased politicians.

That the excessive emphasis on the development of war machines and destructive weapons has been wrong and irrational has by now been brought to the fore. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a most villainous and mistrusting world order has come to an end.

Other less confident are yet to take the cue from this phenomenal event. But the fact that dissenting voices once in the minority are now being treated with respect is quite a positive sign. So the priority shift as demanded by today's realities must not be looked at with apprehension.

Much as the resentment against change may count, in the final analysis the merits of science and technology — the all-governing force of today — will prove to be the deciding factor. In this context, it is not science and technology that are to blame for much of the woes and sufferings of the mankind but the villain naturally, has to be the use or abuse of the knowledge so diverted to destructive purposes.

This, therefore, points to the need for environment-friendly science and technology. Not surprisingly, green movements — some of them too radical to be accommodated in today's stage of development and others, sober and rational enough for the purpose—are set on course to sweep the globe in the not too distant future. The important point is that a scientific approach to individual life is what really makes all the difference in the future shape of the civilization. It is a question of scientific culture as well that awaits to be cultivated by society at large.

In this task, countries like Bangladesh enjoy a few advantages and also face some overwhelming odds. Advantages, because the level of industrial development in such countries is yet to be a major contribution to the environmental pollution. But, on the other hand, whatever scientific and industrial installations there are, the system of effluent disposal and safety measures are either at a primary level or there is simply none to be bothered about. So the merits and demerits of having a less developed system of industrial and scientific base points to the fact that we made a vigorous effort to strike a balance between the oriental self-abnegation and occidental material comfort. The baneful influence of heavy consumerism surely needs to be reined in and that way the world may have enough resources at its disposal for the really needy. Let a scientific mentality make for the sham swagger of the mind.

Bad Habits Bad Hearts

There was a time when diabetes was known as the rich ones' ailment. Dr Muhammad Ibrahim did yeoman service in setting that wrong notion right. Heart diseases are still held in popular estimation our affliction visiting only the affluent. If the idea is not altogether without a base, it is of course not true on the whole. But when one reads about a seminar on the position and the do's and don'ts of cardio-vascular diseases being held at the costliest hotel in the country, many would very reasonably be inclined to rethink and take the array of heart-related diseases as being an exclusive preserve of the people with the Midas Touch.

The irony of it all, the speakers including the physician minister Professor B Chowdhury and some of the nation's top heart specialists did in unison plead for a mass motivation campaign as the most effective and cheap way to fight the big killer. We do not mean to overstretch this obviously ludicrous practice which could be dismissed if it did not involve a lot of money, no matter whose. On the contrary, we want to emphasize why not arrange popular lectures by the self-same authorities at more accessible places and far wider audiences. What is supremely needed is to draw in the so-called ordinary people. Unending series of popular lectures on the subject by top people going all around the nation is the need of the hour. In this the first and the most formidable snag we shall hit is getting the heart experts to go round the towns leaving their fabulously paying practice.

Smoking has been identified for the umpteenth time as one of the main villains of the piece. What attempts have so far been taken to stop smoking in buses and tempos and places of public congregation? None whatsoever. Why? Cigarette brands are printing statutory warnings against smoking as religiously that it has long lost any point it ever had.

One speaker has blamed social unrest and instability as a main contributing factor. This plea for keeping the status quo is quite expected of the members of the upper social crust but there is a contradiction of terms which makes instability inevitable when unbalanced social equations are attempted to be maintained in the name of peace etc. Only a balanced society can qualify for relative stability, not the type ours is.

Heart problems have become endemic here because of a kind of unique socio-economic situation. We do not produce even a little industrially and agriculturally we turn in an all pervasive deficit yield. And again, we are, by universal agreement, poorest of the poor nations. And yet Bangladesh is a highly consumeristic society. Ailments go straight to the heart through this strange and unreal and absurd spell of consumerism that emanates from the rich few but haunts and infects all of the impoverished and even hungry crores. Eating foods heavy in fatty acids has lately turned into a status symbol to which even the poor millions aspire for every moment of their existence. It was for our social, cultural and political leaders to say no to this by setting personal examples.

Bangladesh hasn't so far been able to make it a crime of that Ershadian legacy — ostentation. Heart diseases are integrally related to ostentations and irresponsible ways of life. We are socially moving through, as if, in a trance induced by hallucinogenic drugs — levitating metres above the ground. That has to go before we can talk sensibly about the boon of eating and going about modestly. And save ourselves from hypertensive and renal attacks on the most active little organ in our bodies.

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.

Payment of Telephone bills

Sir, I have been a Telephone subscriber since 1985 and paying the Telephone bill sometimes in cash and sometimes by cheque with the sad experience that at times the bank quite whimsically refused to accept payment when tendered with cheque and insisted upon payment in cash although I found that cheques were being accepted from others which went to show that the system of payment by cheque had not been withdrawn.

Recently there has been reallocation of branches for payment of such bills in which different branches of three banks have been included for receipt of my bill, but the branches are located elsewhere and not a single branch of Motijheel has been included where I have been paying the bill since 1985. Payment of bills to banks close to residence may be convenient for many, but there are others who would prefer payment to banks close to their place of work. It is not understood, as to what necessitated the T & T Department to take a decision to reallocate the branches which has created positive difficulty in my case, and I believe for many others too. As the banks receiving payment send advice of receipt of bills the same or the following day to the Department there seems no difficulty to maintain records by the

Department. Although all the Departments have taken such step for reallocating branches, it has been noticed that in some cases quite busy bank branches have been allotted a good number of accounts. The Electricity Department however, while re-allocating branches included at least one bank branch in Motijheel, whereas WASA, T & T and Gas do not appear to have done so, which would have been convenient for the consumers/subscribers.

The Departments while allocating branches should look into the convenience of bill payers as well or at least seek their option as to Branch since this is a matter of regular feature. Such a measure would accelerate collection of bills rather easily.

S M Hussain
Mirpur, Dhaka.

Margarine

Sir, Margarine is artificial butter. There are two types — one free of cholesterol as it is made from poly unsaturated vegetable oil and the other, not so free as it is made either from saturated vegetable oil or animal fat. Again in the cholesterol-free group there is a super quality — free of salt and milk — which makes it ideal for heart patients even. People who want to avoid cholesterol may take the first group margarine for health and vigour in place of butter.

Unfortunately margarine is not produced in Bangladesh and hence it has to be im-

ported. Although the ex-factory prices of margarines are quite low they become quite costly in comparison to locally produced butter due to imposition of import duty and other taxes ranging from 90% to 100% thereby compelling many people who need it most to go without it.

As it is a food item needed by those who require a cholesterol-free butter, is it not justifiable to reduce the import duty on it to make it affordable by all such people? We would urge upon the benign Government to categorically declare margarine as a food item and fix only 10% Import Duty on cholesterol-free margarines as against the current 60% on all margarines.

A/Tab Ahmed Khan
West Nakhalpara, Dhaka.

Commonmen with guns!

Sir, The troubled socio-political milieu in present Bangladesh sends shock waves of uncertainties, insecurities and gloomy consequential probabilities across the whole nation. People seek to go to other countries, other lands and other societies in hope of an escape. 'Might is right' proposition rides high everywhere in this country.

Certain goons, be 'political' or, of bandit nature, arrogantly brandish lethal arms here in Bangladesh. It seems the unarmed commonmen have no capability, no means to resist the armed goons, the ill-tending moneyed and influential people or, their lackeys. They get injured and frequently succumb to fatal blows whenever they try to resist crimes. Everybody — the police, the court, the politicians — overlook it but some quarters often only politicize it to realise some vested interests, that's all. However, these commonmen sometimes gal-

lantly oppose the illegally armed people. Even, sometimes they catch hold of the goons. Usually the police intervene and arrest the culprits. But for some mysterious reasons, the culprits again re-emerge and at that later occasion with heightened animality and ferocity. The police fails to save the innocent people. Allegedly, the stance of police at times rather protects the culprits. Thus, the gallantry of the commonmen go down the drain unrewarded and often punished.

Under the present circumstances, the people's representatives and the law-makers should unanimously agree that it is high time to empower the commonmen with licensed arms to protect their lives and belongings.

On one hand, the newspaper reports and official requests by the government to surrender arms confirm that there is already a huge quantity of guns and ammunition in the hands of the culprits. On the other hand, the government, the Home Ministry, the Law Ministry, the politicians and the Parliamentarians have failed to improve the dismal situation prevailing despite repeated appeals from all walks of life. All taken apiece, it is confirmed that the commonmen need to be armed for self-defence.

We hope which the above named institutions have failed to accomplish, will be made possible by widely armed commonmen. When everyman will have the gun, every next man will think twice before pointing his gun to someone. At least, we should let the people take charge of their lives when our established institutions for these effects fail to protect them. For the time being, it has become imperative.

Vox Populi

OPINION

Ritualize Tree-plantation

In recent times, the word "deforestation" has alarmed the whole world and an overwhelming attention is being given to it. The necessity of afforestation is highly emphasized by almost all of the global leadership. From our Bangladesh experiences, we find the warnings repeatedly registered by the poets, artists and recently emerging environmentalists against destruction of forests coming to reality with all their menacing implications.

In the past the poets used to lament our human beings' detachment from nature, inter alia, the forests. Now, people are really returning back to the forests (of course not unarmed or bereft of tree-cutting equipment), while forests are receding from the surface of the earth. Reportedly, this is an irony, people from the developed and the developing countries are living with. Already, the heat-wave is unbearable here and there.

However, it needs no further emphasis that mere warnings, admonishments expressed to catch an easy praise in a seminar or a symposium will be of no use if things are not put into order practically. And, we have learnt that it is already too late; but it is better late than never. Specific planning to educate the people is an urgency while drastic actions are a must to make non-conforming parties to conform.

While comprehensive drive will be hopefully undertaken by the Government and the NGOs, though in the face of a lot of cynicism and criticism, efforts from individual socialites will exert a big impact. Maybe, given the status of a mandatory custom to plant a

sapling after the birth of a child and planting two saplings during a marriage ceremony — one at bride's home and another at groom's, we hope that this will serve the purpose of tree-planting extensively. Of course, the people should be motivated adequately to take care of the growing trees. Such customs are in vogue in some countries. We can have it in Bangladesh also.

While human heads are a great boon (above 5 billion already), trees are declining species, in some cases are becoming extinct. They cut the trees, but they do not plant trees. If such exploitations are allowed to go on without any practical check and control, plunder may bring in a complete fatal blow for the mankind.

In the near future, towns may become a jungle of concrete; the villages may become deserts in effect. For all these, we the humans cannot blame anybody else but ourselves, our national and international leadership.

While international leadership are reportedly internationalizing specific countries' interests, ignoring, not in words but in work, the grave implications going on at a threatening speed in developing countries, the national leadership should do something regarding such a big threat. We hope, incurably hopeful as we are, that the national leadership will rise to the occasion to explain to their votaries regarding the real meaning of "afforestation" by work, not by words.

Hubert Francis Sarker,
Singola, Dhaka