

Dhaka, Saturday, May 16, 1992

Political Solution is the Right Approach

It appears from the news reports that the Prime Minister made a good start for a peaceful solution to the Hill Tracts problem during her first ever visit to that troubled area. We fully endorse her view that a political solution will have to be found to the outstanding problems of the area — and not a military one — within the Constitutional framework of the country. Begum Zia's insistence that the Hill Tracts is an integral part of the country, that the people of the area are equal citizens as anybody else and her emphasis on the development priorities for the region were the right overtures, which we hope will set further negotiation on a firm footing.

The 16-year old insurgency that has greatly damaged the development potential of the region and, for all practical purpose, set the clock back in many ways, will now have to stop. It is quite likely that the democratically elected government will enjoy far greater credibility with the representatives of the local people in being able to convince them to seek a peaceful solution of all their problems. Whatever support the insurgent group—Shanti Bahini—enjoys could now be effectively curtailed through a more genuine and open dialogue between the representatives of the area and the government. The Prime Minister's offer to engage in talks at any time and with an open mind on all issues, gives the right signal for a fruitful dialogue.

One of the underlying causes for the unrest in the area is, of course, economic. The backwardness of the area serves as a propaganda fodder to spread discontent, especially among the youth. However, the issue of economic development of the area must be seen in the context of the level of development of the country as a whole. Herein lies the role of the local leaders whose duty it is to put the issues in proper perspective. In this regard the decision by the government to entrust the local elected bodies with the responsibility of seven additional areas, on the top of the three that they already enjoyed, is a move in the right direction. Effectively now the local government of the Hill Tracts area enjoys considerable autonomy in bringing about their own development in almost all the important areas, including industry, commerce, agriculture, education, public health and the preservation of unclassified forests. The prime minister has promised further strengthening of the relevant local bodies along with providing additional funds.

It appears that the PM's visit and the overtures made by her to the Hill Tracts people set the stage well to start a genuine dialogue and confidence building process. The important thing now is to build on the goodwill that appears to have been created. The commitments made by the PM must be implemented without unnecessary delay and the local leadership made to feel that they are really empowered to carry out the development tasks necessary for the welfare of their people. But along with the role of the government and the administrative machinery, emphasis must be laid on the role of the local leaders. They must sincerely join in the efforts to heal the old wounds and strengthen the foundation for peace.

Trucks on the Rivers

Traffic deaths are a regular feature of media coverage of national affairs — naggingly regular appearing in print and broadcast over air and taking shape on a domestic screen every day of the year. But all of these relate to road tragedies — rarely punctuated by launches sinking after being buffeted and battered by tropical storms and taking down by the hundreds bodies of men, women and children trapped in their hull.

Thursday morning's tragedy was of an extraordinary nature. Three Engineering University students were drowned as a result of collision between two river vessels. Journey by launches specially during the rough river season of Baishakh has always been quite risky. But no one thought country boats were also unsafe specially on an expanse of stormless still water as the Buriganga was on that fateful morning of Thursday. That three invaluable lives would perish just because they took a country-boat journey, bodes very ill of river traffic and perhaps gives a danger signal that river vessel collisions or river traffic mishaps are going to be order of the day — exactly as road accidents now are. But, at this point, perhaps it may be easier to put a stop to that dangerous possibility.

The country boats powered by shallow-tubewell engines have been a very welcome innovation by our local lowest level technicians and fitters. This has almost revolutionised riverine movement of people and goods and has been hailed as such by us. Initially the fast boats, with bodies made for non-fast cruising, met with accidents of their own making. Any new innovation involving society at large may involve such 'prices'. But Thursday's tragedy resembled more a truck ramming a fully crammed minibus. Drivers of shallow-engined country boats must not be allowed to imitate the truck driver's arrogance and act as the lord of the waters.

It is imperative that we learn a thing or two from Thursday's tragedy. Rag Day or whatever, nine students — very intelligent as is evident from their records — had no business to board such a small dinghy specially when most of them knew no swimming. Think of boys coming from interior districts and not knowing how to swim! Think of how education has taken our best boys and girls away from the life and nature of our country.

Our heartfelt condolences to the bereaved families. Unnecessary and unforeseen deaths are always more painful than others. Ways must be found to minimise such deaths.

Kurdish Elections Choose Between Iraq and the West

by Hazhir Teimourian

IRAQ'S Kurds are putting their hopes on a planned leadership election to break the deadlock between their current leaders over whether to resume peace talks with Baghdad.

Iraq believes the election to be a step toward the Kurds' separation and has vowed to interrupt it. Iraqi anti-aircraft missiles were moved into the Kurdish territory, bringing a warning from the Western coalition still patrolling the area and raising concerns of another Iraq-West confrontation.

The talks were first held in the summer of last year, soon after the collapse of the Kurdish uprising following the Gulf War. President Saddam Hussein offered a measure of autonomy to the Kurds, but insisted on keeping his security forces in the Kurdish region.

He also refused to define borders for the region, fuelling Kurdish fears of the continuation of Saddam's 'Arabisation' programme, which is settling large numbers of Arabs in Kurdistan.

Jalal Talabani, the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), who led the first delegation of Kurdish negotiators in Baghdad, believes negotiations with Baghdad should stop. He feels the Iraqi leader has no intention of offering the Kurds any real autonomy.

He also fears that any agreement with Saddam would provide the Western powers

More than two million Kurds living in northern Iraq have begun preparations for the election of a regional assembly to provide them with a unified leadership. Saddam Hussein's government says the election would be a step towards separation and has vowed to interrupt it. Gemini News Service reports on the continued troubles of those opposed to Iraq's government.

with an excuse to withdraw the remaining 48 military aircraft they keep in eastern Turkey, leaving the Kurds once more at the mercy of the Iraqi army.

Talabani's rival for the leadership of Iraq's Kurds is Massud Barzani, leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Barzani believes the best option is to negotiate with Baghdad and then hope for international guarantees to any agreement the two sides might reach. He does not have faith in the support of Western leaders.

Both options, however, have serious shortcomings. If Talabani's advice is followed and the Kurds boycott Baghdad peace talks, Western powers might recall their military support, saying that the Kurds are not serious about finding a solution to their predicament.

But if Barzani emerges as the leader and talks are held with Baghdad, it is almost cer-

tain that neither the Western powers nor the United Nations would guarantee any resulting agreement. Such powers are wary of being sucked into what they see as a potentially endless conflict of ethnic interests.

It is not possible to confidently predict which leader will win the election, scheduled for May 17. Neither is thought able to fill the assembly with his tribal or party loyalists. The major block of voting delegates will probably be independent regional personalities and tribal chiefs.

Barzani's KDP has recently lost a series of municipal elections to the PUK and is pressing for a postponement of the date of the assembly election.

In the meantime, the situation remains highly volatile. Since last October, government forces have stopped food, fuel and machinery from entering the Kurdish region

Where the Kurds are



Kurds are mostly Sunni Muslims. As mountain people they had no political unity for centuries. Groups of villages owed allegiance to chiefs. 400 BC. As Carduchi people they attacked retreating Greek leader Xenophon. Most famous scion was Saladin. Since 7th Cent name Kurd applied to West Iranians and others astride the Zagros. 1914-17. Turks raised Kurds to fight Russians. 1920: Treaty of Sevres. Turkey accepted scheme for Kurdish state, but it was stillborn. Since 1920 Kurds have staged many revolts to fight for independent Kurdistan.

Who the Kurds are



and have withheld the salaries of large numbers of government employees, such as teachers and municipal workers.

In addition, government forces are continuing to attack villages on the edge of Kurdistan, forcing a quarter of a million more people, largely from the region surrounding the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, into the Kurdistan interior.

Western allies seem willing to continue their military presence in eastern Turkey to make sure there is no full attack on the Kurdish region. At the same time, it seems they are tolerating Iraqi harassment on the edges of Kurdistan to pressure Kurdish leaders to sign a formal peace agreement.

An agreement that would last beyond the eventual withdrawal of western Allies would be enough to spare Washington, London and Paris political embarrassment at home over the messy situation.

The possibility of another major confrontation between the West and Saddam Hussein may be discounted for the time being. The long-term future of the Kurds and Iraq's other opposition groups, however, appears bleak if Saddam and his Baath Party remain in power.

— GEMINI NEWS

HAZHIR TEIMOURIAN, an Iranian Kurd, is a Middle East specialist for The Times of London.

Indian Army Keeps Door Open for Women Recruits

Priya Darshini writes from New Delhi

There is room enough for women in the Indian Armed Forces — as long as it's far away from the battlefronts

civilian or in the military. I am motivated by a sense of patriotism and I do enjoy being in the Army.

However, the number of women joining the Armed Forces Medical College has dwindled. From an average of 25 enrollees annually, only seven women were among the 130 cadets admitted in 1991.

According to a senior medical officer, many male doctors have not taken kindly to the women being given softer postings. Another source of irritation is that women doctors married to military officers can get concessions like being transferred to where their husbands are posted.

The same problems could confront other Army units now being opened to women, but Army headquarters staff do not think so.

"The branches that are being opened to women have been carefully selected," says an administrative officer. "For instance, all the jobs in the education or legal branch are in cities or command or area headquarters."

"Male officers in these branches would not be able to claim field service and the race for promotions would be between equals. In fact, these are softer jobs than in the medical branch."

The military brass still does

not think very highly of women being placed in combat roles. Says a senior officer: "We have to accept that women and men are biologically different. The fact that the timings of male athletes are better than that of women athletes shows the difference."

"We may speak of the push-button war and video war games. But the fact is that much of the hard battles are fought by hardy soldiers with rifles and bayonets. Only very exceptional women can do it," he adds.

An army general also notes how physical standards applied to women cadets are lower than those applied to men. For example, at the US Military Academy in West Point, New York, a female cadet "A" grade on an obstacle course is equal to a male cadet "C" grade. They call it gender norming.

This lowers the quality of personnel, says the general. "It

is something like the reservation system. Women need to score less than men to qualify. But the purpose of the military is not to provide jobs. Our job is to fight."

Such opinion notwithstanding, female presence in the Indian Armed Forces is expected to grow. For example, the Indian Navy is thinking of inducting women into the technical service notably communication and traffic control.

The Air Force has already advertised for women cadets in the meteorology branch, apart from administration, education, law and logistics.

"The overall performance of women is on par with men," says Air Commodore SK Mitra who is the director general of the Air Force Medical Service. "There are physiological problems like pregnancy, but that has not affected their service."

— Depthnews Asia

ATTEMPTING to enter Europe illegally by boat, Pathi Tahib was first robbed, then forced to make a desperate swim to the Spanish Coast before he was rescued by two adolescents just as he was on the verge of death.

The youngsters took him to a farm in Algeciras, on the Southern tip of Spain, where he spent a little over a month before he was arrested by Spanish authorities and deported back to Morocco.

Tahib is one of many who annually attempt to emigrate into Europe by illegal and dangerous means — usually by boat — across the Straits of Gibraltar. According to the Provincial Government of Cadiz, 1,688 illegal immigrants were arrested on Spain's southernmost coast in 1991. It expects that number to triple in 1992.

"They say many drown in the Straits," Tahib declared. "But the letters and photos my uncle in Italy has sent me are enough to convince me that I have to try again."

Twenty-one-year-old Tahib, from the Moroccan town of

Morocco

Beni-enzar, failed to obtain a visa for Italy last year and decided to attempt to enter Europe illegally through Spain. He worked in Tangiers as a construction labourer, a tourist guide and a kitchen helper. By last December he had managed to save almost US\$ 2,000 and was ready to make his move.

Tahib had to pay US\$ 700 up front to those in charge of the clandestine voyage across the Straits of Gibraltar. He was then put on a waiting list of over 2,000 persons.

The wait cost Tahib dearly. "On New Year's Eve, the Tangiers police rounded-up a lot of people on the streets while I and some others were looking at a notice for a boat," he recalled. "I was arrested. Two policemen pushed me into the back of a car and drove me to some woods, where they beat me and robbed me of everything I

Swimming to Better Fortunes

A Moroccan youth who swam across the Straits of Gibraltar just to work in Europe desperately wants to repeat his dreadful adventure. Pablo Azocar of IPS reports from Tangiers, Morocco.

had." He added: "They confiscated all my papers, but since I had already paid for the boat I decided to stick to my plan of somehow getting to the other side of the Straits."

His chance came on January 5 and early in the morning he boarded a boat with 39 other men and two women. "They told us they would leave us some place along the Spanish coast," said Tahib. "I didn't have any more money, but was disposed to do whatever was necessary to get to Milan, where one of my uncles could help me get a job in construc-

tion." They were already about to reach the Spanish Coast when a powerful floodlight was suddenly turned on them. They were intercepted by a Spanish Coast Guard cutter. Tahib recounted the "panic was total, we all jumped overboard into the water."

A strong swimmer, Tahib claims he swam some 80 metres underwater to rocks along the coast near the Spanish city of Tarifa. But the worst was still to come.

Tahib walked for days through the mountains, terrorised at the possibility of

being surprised by the police. He suffered mainly from hunger, he said, "which gnawed at my vitals. But afterwards this disappeared, and I kept on walking without having any idea where I was going. I slept off and on because I was very weak."

On January 15, he encountered two adolescent Spaniards, Francisco and Carlos Suarez, some three km from the city of Algeciras.

The two took him to their father's farm outside Algeciras. They fed him, nursed his injuries and gave him clothes. Once he was well, Tahib was offered a job on the farm.

On February 17, two civil guard agents turned up at the farm and arrested him for illegal residence and not having any documents. Tahib was taken to the detention centre in Tarifa where he joined 78

other illegal immigrants. They were crammed into a room measuring 20 square metres and designed for 20 persons.

Human rights organisations have denounced the practice of detaining immigrants in Tarifa where prisoners do not get any legal assistance, nor an interpreter, nor the minimum sanitary conditions.

Tahib was treated by Dr Alberto Gutierrez, who works for the Workers Commissions Union. Gutierrez said Tahib was "on the point of dying when he was found."

"Some people might think it was very reckless of me to go to a place I didn't know, with neither money nor papers. But this not being brave, it's just something you do when you have nothing to lose," Tahib said.

Having been repatriated to Tangiers, he now cleans washrooms at an Italian restaurant. He is determined to save enough money to try again.

Tahib said: "Between dying here little by little and dying on the other side of the Straits, I prefer the latter option."

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.

Bureaucratic jargonese

Sir, With the computer in everyday use in large organisations, the Government's development activities may be released to the press in a series of pictograms, charts and graphs.

Such graphics show information at a glance which would take a dozen paragraphs to explain in lengthy (and boring) articles written in academic style. Reports and background papers prepared for official use are not suitable for the mass media. Even seminar papers have to be drastically trimmed and rewritten for popular reading.

These graphics could be faxed to the newspapers and magazines and other distributing agencies. The Government may have its own Development

Monthly (in two languages), which should be available freely (no searching all over Dhaka) at the news stalls, and sold cheaply (heavily subsidised). The citizens do not get the complete picture through the Ministers' speeches, press releases, press notes and handouts.

Supplements may be arranged at regular intervals on each sector (less writing, more graphics — a picture is a thousand words) BTV is hardly using any graphics for presentation of statistics and data (except playing with the video effects generators).

There should be training courses for writing in popular style — at the Government end (bureaucratic jargonese?). Publicity and propaganda (in public interest!) have their own techniques. We manage to do little, but whatever is done

ought to be well splashed. We cannot make mountains of molehills, but at least make the molehills visible (communicate).

Alif Zabr
Dhaka

Trees

Sir, There is much written and spoken exhortations for protection of the environment. One of the most important ways for this is to preserve and expand the forest. In Bangladesh forest resources are being very rapidly destroyed. The authorities, at least formally, are committed to stop further depletion of forest. The Government has rightly put a ban on use of wood in the brickfields. How far this restriction is effective we do not know. The local authorities i.e. Municipalities, City Corporations etc should be responsible to enforce this.

Unfortunately right in the capital city of Dhaka these days we see many roads being repaired by using wood for lapping asphalt used for the purpose. Just to mention one location — Gulshan Road Nos. 9

and 12 are being repaired by using huge quantity of wood. This must be the case in many other places in the city. Can we not expect our young and energetic city Mayor to stop use of wood in the repairs of city roads? We also would welcome a move under his leadership and that of Ward Commissioners for mobilisation of public opinion and voluntarily public participation in tree plantation all over the city in the coming months.

Habib Sadat Choudhury
Gulshan, Dhaka

Mitalee Mukherjee

Sir, Recently the Bangladesh Television presented its viewers one magnificent musical session, that is, special song programme of Mitalee Mukherjee. In the programme Mitalee Mukherjee presented some popular songs which greatly enthralled the audiences. The significant side of Mitalee's performance is that, her voice is crystal-clear and she can pronounce and express each and every word of lyrics correctly and clearly.

She also rendered a popular Urdu number which is a sort of devotional song containing moral advice.

I would like to extend my profound congratulations to Mitalee Mukherjee and hope to find her again on BTV in the future. The BTV deserves our thanks for producing and telecasting the solo song programme.

M Zahidul Haque
Assistant Professor,
Dhaka

"Hidden treasure in Cox's Bazar"

Sir, further to my letter published under the above caption in your daily of May 1, it may be mentioned that our successive governments have failed to utilize the valuable mineral 'black-gold' for the last two to three decades. If the government cannot use the 'black-gold' economically and commercially it is humbly requested that others, even myself and my associates may kindly be issued with a mining licence for the utilization of

the minerals in the private sector. Why the minerals and our national wealth be wasted?

O H Kabir
Wari, Dhaka

President's award

Sir, I may be wrong as I am an old man of 72, but it looked to me to be funny when on May 3 evening I saw on the TV screen our Prime Minister giving away the President's awards for Agricultural Development. Whether one likes it or not, we have a President and it would have, perhaps, been more in the fitness of things if the President himself gave away the prizes and the Prime Minister delivered the principal speech.

A Gayam
Gulshan, Dhaka