

Dhaka, Monday, May 25, 1992

Unease and Intrigue in Cox's Bazar

Foreign Minister A S M Mustafizur Rahman sounded a highly optimistic note on Saturday about the prospect of an early repatriation of the 250,000 Myanmar refugees currently living in camps in Cox's Bazar and Banderban districts. He told reporters that the first batch of Rohingya refugees would be leaving "soon", under provisions of the April 28 bilateral accord which he insisted was a "very good one." The minister's faith in the feasibility of the April 28 accord is a commendable one, but, in the absence of any visible willingness among the refugees to volunteer to return, one can legitimately wonder if that faith is not also a slightly misplaced one.

The accord itself has, so far, failed to generate the kind of confidence necessary to persuade refugees that their lot would be a happier one if they went back. By all accounts, this lack of confidence has resulted from the absence of any supervisory or monitoring role for the United Nations in the accord. For Bangladesh to have assumed that the refugees, who had left behind their homes to escape what they considered to be state-sponsored terror, would agree to return without the kind of assurance that only a United Nations presence could provide, was perhaps a little too optimistic. Bangladesh's failure to persuade or force Myanmar to accept UN supervision and monitoring is now proving to be an expensive one, as the social, economic and environmental cost of continued presence of the refugees mount daily.

Another factor has now come to the fore which is threatening to turn the issue into an ugly one. According to a report published in this paper on Sunday, several Rohingya groups, including the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) and the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) are actively discouraging, even threatening, refugees who may be willing to volunteer for repatriation. These groups, which are not recognised by the Bangladesh government as bonafide representatives of the Rohingya people, are reportedly getting assistance from a number of local political groups and some foreign voluntary, humanitarian organisations. Such activities by non-national organisations are a wholly unwelcome development, as they bring the government's authority in the region into question. The government should investigate the reports and find out to what extent foreign non-government organisations (NGOs) are involved in the political aspects of the problem, and make it quite clear that such activities are not compatible with their status in this country. If a foreign organisation wishes to run a hospital or two, then that is quite fine, but if it engages in financing or assisting in other ways Rohingya or local political groups, then that is totally unacceptable.

With genuine refugee unease and political intrigue on the one hand, and Myanmar resistance to international involvement on the other, Mustafizur Rahman certainly has, despite his unbounded optimism, a considerable degree of problem. With crores of Taka worth of forestry being destroyed every month, the cost to the environment alone is a crippling one. And politicisation of the issue is now creating a problem which may soon get out of hand. The foreign minister has invested heavily on Myanmar's "goodwill" and maintenance of "friendly relations". It is time that the investment started paying the required dividend — in the form of an unequivocal commitment from Yangon to allow UN supervision and monitoring of the repatriation and resettlement process. Yangon's professed "eagerness" to take the refugees back may well be a genuine one, but given the reality on the ground, mere eagerness is nowhere near enough to solve the problem.

His Passion for the Beautiful, Zest for Life, Quest for Love

Today the nation will celebrate the remembrance of Qazi Nazrul Islam. It is hoped that on the 93rd birthday anniversary of the poet his contributions to our arts, politics and culture as a whole would find an evergrowing and avid audience.

The above are pious wishes which if come true would make all true lovers of culture and indeed all that are interested in the welfare and richness of the social being happy. But things are not as simple as that. The question of a Nazrul or a Tagore having living relevance and adding meaning to society well past their death is very deeply related to the state of literacy and cultivation of the arts and literature. The anniversaries of these great men come and go and they talk and talk from atop the podiums of those master's worth — without ever converting any new soul to the pursuit of the ecstatic experience that can be Nazrul or Tagore whether in their songs or in their poems.

Nazrul's should have been the most effective influence, more even than possibly Tagore's, in the Bangladesh society's overcoming the hurdles to true national integration. The biggest of them, namely, the mean sectarianism, is instead serviced by a wholesale recourse to Nazrul, Nazrul, the poet, is being turned to look a poet of the Muslims and not the firebrand minstrel of the underdogs of all humanity. The first and most publicised of the Bengali poets, Nazrul was a great fighter against colonialism. But this nation, indeed the whole world, needed him most at this hour of dashed dreams of a new dawn of a just world society. For his was the finest and sincerest voice among all bards proclaiming the triumph of an egalitarian socio-political dispensation.

The government is celebrating Nazrul Jayanti in a manner fitting to the national poet. Let it not be a bureaucrats' field day but be a symbol of homage to the great soul — perhaps the only one to span in depth the disparate worlds of ancient Aryan-Dravidian-subcontinental traditions and the relatively later wonderful mix of Perso-Saracenic culture.

His achievements other than one will need a social preparedness to respond to. But that glorious exception, his music, will ever find an eager ear to go direct to the heart. In his plethora of songs — it could be anything between three and eight thousand pieces — he in fact presented us with a storehouse of all worthy north Indian melodies extant till his time. Through these all of our lustrous and creative past would talk to us. And the incorrigible romantic would wring our hearts and make us forget all our daily cares and share in his passion for the beautiful, his zest for life and his quest for love.

TECHNOCRATIC SOLUTIONS VS DEMOCRATIC OPTIONS

Difficult Choices Determine the Pace of Privatisation

A combination of internal compulsions and external pressures has produced a loose consensus among major political parties in the country, especially the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami League, that the nation has little choice but to hasten the pace of privatisation of the economy.

The broad unspoken agreement between the ruling party and the opposition is that the country should let market economy come into own, with the minimum of "control points" as suggested by a former Governor of Bangladesh Bank, A K N Ahmed in a three-part series published by this paper last week.

However, as a former Deputy Prime Minister Jamal Uddin Ahmed said in these columns on Friday, while "conceptually there are no major differences, opinions vary on how, to what extent and to what time frame these (steps towards the introduction of market economy) are to be implemented." Then, the former BNP leader ended his stimulating piece with the kind of statement that all politicians use most, "Enough confusion has already been created. It's time to clear them."

At this stage, it is relatively easy to identify the areas of confusion, which may get more complicated in time unless they are tackled decisively and without any delay.

On the internal front, one major area of confusion lies in growing contradictions between political pledges of the government, such as waiving the agricultural loan of up to Taka 5,000 or the promise to avoid any retrenchment of workers during the reorganisation of the railway, and the pragmatic moves of the Ministry of Finance, moves which are partly prompted by the technocratic approach of Minister Saifur Rahman and partly, if not largely, by the conditionalities imposed by the donor nations and aid agencies. The danger is, as time goes on, the leaders of the ruling party, especially Prime Minister Khaleida Zia, will find it increasingly difficult to discard or even to tone down popular political pledges in favour of explaining hard and not-so-popular economic decisions. If a government cannot take tough decisions during its second year in office, it will probably go for increasingly soft options in subsequent years, in the light of its chances in the next election and the fear of growing strength of the opposition.

The second area of confusion relates to the failure of the administration to revitalise and sharpen the tools of privatisation, such as the banking sector, the rural credit system, a relatively corruption-free streamlined bureaucracy and a decentralised decision-making process. Here, we also appear to have overlooked the fact that the market-oriented economy cannot come into its own on a country-wide basis, unless the development of rural based commerce and industry goes hand in hand with the progress in the industries set up in urban centres.

Furthermore, the development of rural economy does not merely mean setting up medium-sized industries in villages, which use impoverished local people as cheap labour. It also means involving rural entrepreneurs in small projects, ranging from, say, bicycle repair shops to grocery stores, supported by easily-available rural credit. This is what reduction of rural poverty is all about, as we have seen in China since it embarked on its modernisation process or as we now see in Vietnam which, after years of debate, is moving towards a market-oriented economy on a limited scale. In fact, China had turned to rural

We continue the discussion on the economy of Bangladesh, started last week by A K N Ahmed, Jamal Uddin Ahmed, Shahed Latif, among others. We expect — indeed welcome — more articles on the subject as well as the coming budget from our readers.

development as a key to the country's overall progress even before it had launched its modernisation programme. On this subject, a book which has much relevance for South Asia is "Learning from China" written by Sartaj Aziz, the present Finance Minister of Pakistan, published in the seventies when Aziz was the second-in-command of the Rome-based International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

All these areas of confusion, suffering from lack of policy directions to varying degrees, are now overshadowed by conflicting opinions, within the administration and outside, over conditionalities. To take a commonsense view, conditionalities imposed on developing countries by aid agencies, especially the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and donor nations must be seen in the context of our over-dependence on external assistance, the failure to use foreign aid with optimum success, the inability of the developing countries to mobilise their domestic resources to match, even to the smallest degree, the ever-growing assistance from outside and to relate the development process to the reduction of poverty at the grassroots level,

with the former Deputy Prime Minister that there are double standards when it comes to import quotas introduced by industrialised countries against exports from the Third World and the insistence that developing countries should do away with similar restrictions. The best way of fighting these double standards is for developing countries to take a tough, strong and united position inside UNCTAD, GATT and other agencies in the UN system. On these issues, the Third World is not without its allies. After all, such questions as agricultural subsidies — which Ahmed mistakenly describes as "a norm in developed countries" — import restrictions and tariff barriers have become divisive ones within the European Economic Community (EEC), between EEC and the United States and, last but not the least, between US and Japan.

Even on the question of conditionalities, we should get some support from some unexpected quarters. In a commentary published by the International Herald Tribune (IHT) some time last month, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, a former US Permanent Representative to the United Nations, blamed President Bush for "transferring to [international institutions] de-

in taking a retrospective view of the past, we — Jamal Uddin Ahmed and myself — have our differences, indeed rather serious ones.

According to Ahmed, "Prior to 1947, excepting a few utility services, the economy in the region was, by and large, totally free. The economic sectors were not demarcated between public and private sectors."

Was the economy of British India, a colonial territory, really free? What was the share of our own people — Hindus and Muslims — in the industries, in the production of manufactured goods and even in the service sector? What happened to all our raw materials, like jute and cotton, except in ending up in the factories in the United Kingdom?

This particular historical fact is somewhat irrelevant to our present discussion. But I could not let it go unchallenged.

What is more to the point is Ahmed's assertion that "with independence, everything changed rapidly...mammoth public sector investments were undertaken in all walks of life." Then comes a list of areas, from artificial insemination of cattle stock to airline companies, from primary education to the development of nuclear physics, which "came under state ownership and control."

The question is, did India and Pakistan have a choice but to place all these areas under state ownership — in India, Pandit Nehru's commitment to socialism was a major factor — when, thanks to the colonial exploitation of the past, there was hardly much of indigenous private capital in the erstwhile East Pakistan? If we did not have the Pakistan Industrial Development Corporation (PIDC), we would have been much, much worse off.

Yet, in a matter of years, Adamjis and Dauds entered the scene in both wings of the country and set up their industries, trading houses, manufacturing plants and even banks.

By the time General Ayub assumed power in 1958, industrialists in what was then West Pakistan had gained their footholds in most sectors of the country's economic life. By early sixties, noted economist Dr Mahbubul Haq propounded the theory that some 22 families controlled the economic destiny of Pakistan, with all the statistics twinkling like stars on a dark sky. The World Bank hailed the progress in Pakistan and even organised a delegation from South Korea to visit the country to study how the private sector in Ayub's Pakistan worked.

We all know by now what kind of price people in erstwhile East Pakistan paid for this progress in Pakistan or what "benefits" reached the poor farmers in Sindh, Baluchistan and Punjab. Yet, the WB hailed this so-called progress and attributed it to the performance of the private sector, the 22 families of Pakistan.

Despite this dismal past performance of the private sector, we remain committed to letting the market economy take shape and play its due role. In avoiding the past errors, we must develop our own agenda, instead of just following the conditionalities suggested by the aid agencies, which our leaders accept at formal meetings but oppose in private conversations. Hence, formal official communications say one thing, but the so-called reliable sources say something else to the media. In the process, we deceive the aid agencies and, what's worse, we deceive ourselves. There must be some other way of moving forward. Let's hope, we can find it soon.

AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

among others. This is the crux of the whole controversy. Of course, the package of conditionalities includes "demands", such as withdrawal of agricultural subsidies and removal of virtually all restrictions on imports, which cannot be met in a country like Bangladesh, unless they are implemented in stages. This, we believe, is the position taken by the Government of Bangladesh.

The anger and frustration that many of our experts feel over conditionalities are well expressed by Jamal Uddin Ahmed in concluding paragraphs of his article, published on Friday, when he asks, "If countries having the highest economic development are allowed to have limitations imposed on the management of their economies, why (should) the poor countries of South Asia be made to accept a prescription which is totally market-oriented and deregulated?"

A part of the answer to this good question is obvious. If a country reaches the level of economic development of any of the four dragons of East Asia — or even of Malaysia — it manages its affairs in the way it likes, without being even told by WB and IMF what it should do to receive foreign assistance which it does not probably need anyway. By the standard set by aid agencies, the performance of these countries is even impressive enough to be a model for other developing countries, especially the nations in South Asia. It can also be said that if countries in South Asia had developed their own individual agenda for progress carefully and carried it out with scrupulous honesty and dedication, they would not have been put in the present humiliating position over the so-called conditionalities.

However, we have no problem in agreeing

cisions and functions that have traditionally been viewed as the business of national governments." Then, she went on to say, "People in many countries are offended by a sense that the IMF's technocrats believe they know what is best for others." (Italics mine: SMA)

The commentary by Kirkpatrick focused on the broad differences between the democratic and technocratic decision-making processes. To quote her again, "The most important requirement of a (technocratic) expert's decision is that it be correct; the most important requirement of a democratic decision is that it be acceptable to those affected by it." Again, to go further, "The technocrat's habit of relying on abstract principles to deal with concrete problems breeds impatience with local detail and indifference toward the particular interests that are critical for elected officeholders."

The former US envoy to the UN, a well-regarded academician by profession, made all these cogent observations on the question of international assistance for countries in Eastern Europe and republics in the former Soviet Union. But they seem as valid for Bangladesh and India as they are for Poland and Russia.

There is, therefore, confusion surrounding the direction of the economy of Bangladesh, which cannot be cleared without a sustained debate, interaction among official and non-official experts and an honest assessment of the performance of successive regimes in the country.

In the process, we should be able to see where the private sector and state-owned corporations went wrong — and sometimes right — in carrying out their assigned tasks.

Somalia

Clearing a Booby-Trapped Nation

Former guerrillas painstakingly clear Northern Somalia of landmines and assorted booby traps at the risk of their own lives. Obinna Anyadike of IPS reports from Hargeysa, Northern Somalia.

KONSAR Hassan, a pretty but gaunt 10-year-old girl, lies in the surgical ward of the hospital here, her left leg blown off above the knee.

While herding sheep across the shrub-dotted wastelands by Hargeysa airport last month, she stepped on an anti-personnel mine — one of thousands littering self-proclaimed Somaliland and endangering its two million people.

Somaliland, near the Ethiopian border, is the former Northern Somalia claimed liberated by the Somali National Movement (SNM). Founded in 1981, SNM waged an armed campaign against the government of then President Siad Barre from its camps in Ethiopia, with which Somalia engaged in an one-and-off war.

But a vicious full-blown civil war broke out in Somalia in 1988, when SNM launched an attack on the northern provinces. Government troops retaliated but began losing steam as Somalia — criticised for its repressive regime — lost foreign support and plunged into a huge economic crisis.

Barre's forces finally retreated from Northern Somalia in January 1991, but not without leaving mines and explosives as grim reminders of the three-year war. An ongoing war between rebel factions has also injured 27,000 persons and claimed 14,000 lives as of November.

The main streets of Hargeysa, Somaliland's bombed-out capital, are still unsafe. The gutted remains of homes are booby-trapped, unexploded ammunition is regularly discovered, and official installations are ringed by mines.

The number of mine injuries has "gradually declined to about one a week," said Dr. Khalid Mohamed of Hargeysa Hospital. "But it is sometimes sporadic."

The improved situation is mostly due to the mine-clearing efforts of the National Pioneer Guerrillas — made up of ex-SNM guerrillas — and their consultants from Rimfire, a British company.

Near the airport, a rag on a bush marks the spot where Konsar was maimed. Ten metres on either side, two six-member Pioneer teams clear separate paths, trying to pick up the edge of the minefield laid to protect a fuel depot. The minefield is believed to run five kms deep to the airfield.

The work is laboriously

slow. At the front of each path, marked by white-washed rocks, the Pioneers — in blue flak jackets and helmets — crouch line abreast and jab the ground ahead with sharpened aluminium probes. They work half-hour shifts to maintain concentration.

It is impossible to see the mines with the naked eye. So long as each probe thrust is angled below the surface, the 54 grams of explosive, designed to cripple rather than kill, with not blow up. The detonator is then unscrewed and all recovered munitions are detonated at the end of the day in a deafening explosion.

The Pioneers at first worked without equipment and the casualty rate among them was high. Since Rimfire came in to lend expertise in October, 20,000 mines and various types of ammunition have been made safe, with 10 casualties among the Pioneers — eight in one accident in February when their vehicle ran over an anti-tank mine.

Hargeysa lacks medical facilities. Rimfire's mobile field

hospitals are held up in Djibouti in the northwest because the road through Ethiopia is still dangerous.

"I am doing this for my country and my people," 28-year-old Mohamed Ahmed said. It's a very difficult profession for us, it's very dangerous, and we don't have enough equipment. These are the problems but we can't stop the work."

Added Rashid Ahmed, 35: "We need any equipment that can detect plastic mines. We are only working by our luck. There is no medical care no blood for transfusions. There is a proverb, if you miss once you don't get a second chance."

The Pioneers had hoped armoured bulldozers like those used in the Gulf War would be sent here. But it now appears they will have to make do with just their flak-jackets and probes.

Rimfire, under two separate contracts funded by the US Agency for International Development, the European Community and the UN High

OPINION

Poverty Alleviation and the Revised ADP

Shahabuddin Mahtab

In the introductory chapter of the Fourth Five-Year Plan (FYP), it is laudably stated, "although numerous, the poor and the disadvantaged groups in Bangladesh have displayed a remarkable resilience to survive against most adverse circumstances including repeated and severe natural calamities of one type or another, when properly organized and supported these groups show a very high degree of efficiency not only in resource use, but also in savings, investment, as well as technology adaptation and entrepreneurship." We are now in the middle stage of our fourth five plan, and prior to that we had three and half plan periods in Bangladesh, and another four five-year plans before that, in what we term as the colonial period.

In the seminars, conferences, meetings and discussions each one of us show an exuberance of our feelings for deprived and the disadvantaged. But have we made any progress, either during the last forty-five years, or in twenty years of Bangladesh. The cold statistical figures, which cannot lie, give us the real picture. Per capita wise we are the poorest stable nation (a few countries which are below us, all have very small populations). In the matter of human development, we are in one hundred and thirty-fifth position (Human Development Report 1992). Those twenty countries which are below us, are all very small or belong to

Sahel region of Africa. The revised ADP for the current period after some cuts has now been shown to be Tk 7150 crore. But the cuts have been from the social sectors. The thing that hurts most is that Tk 20 crore which was provided for poverty alleviation does not find any place in the revised ADP. The city corporations (increased by 270%) and the public administration sector (increased by 230%) are the beneficiaries. If we believe that development has a human face and a country can only be developed if adequate and substantial investments are made we can never make cuts in the health and education sectors. Investment in people can provide us with the maximum rate of return.

By investing in wasteful programmes of expanding a burgeoning bureaucracy, beautification of the cities etc. while neglecting our prime needs of health and education, can only lead us to a downward path. Just a case in point can be mentioned. The whole of Bangladesh has only one cobalt machine for the treatment of cancer patients, and this 1970 machine is also a time expired one.

Our earnest appeal to the Government here is that the Tk 20 crore cut, may be restored for poverty alleviation. Similarly we would urge the Government of Begum Khaleida Zia to provide the country at least with one cobalt machine, on a top priority basis.

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.

Social Insurance and FP

Sir, We listened with interest a view expressed by Dr Mueen Khan a member of Parliament, in the BTV programme Janamat on May 4. He mentioned that in our country poor parents depend on their children for support in old age. In developed countries this problem has been solved through Social Insurance. Absence of any kind of social insurance in Bangladesh, in his view, is impeding progress of the FP programme.

We are in total agreement with the view expressed by Dr Khan and are pleased to let

know our readers that, with the aim of searching a way of overcoming this problem, the Delta Life Insurance Company has developed a very special kind of insurance scheme called the Family Planning Insurance. (Later the scheme was named Social Insurance for Low Income Adopters, in short, SILIA).

Poor young couples (not having more than one child) will comprise the target group for insurance. The government will pay premiums. Those among the insured families who will keep family small will receive, after 25 years, an attractive cash sum (up to Tk 75,000). The sum assured will depend on the number of chil-

dren: less the number, more the sum. Birth deferments will also cause increase in sum assured. Arrangement may also be made to pay pension in lieu of cash lumpsum.

For carrying out a pilot project based on this innovative insurance scheme, the government has sanctioned a sum of Tk 2 crore to Delta Life. Gazipur and Bera upazilas have been selected for the pilot study. Work has already started. In near future, five thousand couples residing in the two areas will be brought under insurance. Impact on FP of this insurance will be studied after every three years.

Ferdous Sultana
Assistant Vice President, PRD,
Delta Life Insurance Company Ltd

Reader's dream

Sir, I eagerly wait throughout the week for Friday's Daily Star. It gives me pleasure of getting a glimpse of people

and places in the wonder world of 'My World'. But the hawk must be funny, he fails to deliver it on some Fridays. Instead, he leaves behind a nondescript one. One Friday morning I caught hold of him red-handed when he was almost vanished from my view. He mumbled awhile. I could not believe that The Daily Star was not published that day. No, I have no complaint against the boy. I rushed to the nearest newsstand by rickshaw and picked up Friday's Daily Star.

I do not bother for the printing mistakes here and there. Sometimes the inside sheet (pages 5-8) was found missing. I do not think this is done by the hawk. The mischief may occur somewhere in the process of delivery in the press premises.

Nonetheless, I like the Daily Star. I cherished a dream of a daily of the stature of The Daily Star since August 1947.

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