

Dhaka, Thursday, May 28, 1992

Allies at Last — Indigenous People and Ecologists

Alexander Norris writes from Rio de Janeiro

On the eve of the World Summit 600 indigenous leaders from every continent converge on Rio de Janeiro in late May to discuss "territory, environment and development." The meeting comes at a time when environmentalists are learning they can no longer afford to ignore aboriginal groups and their interests. Gemini New Service reports on the issues to be debated at a historic meeting.

Brazil: indigenous areas

When Portuguese arrived in 1500, 5 million indigenous peoples lived in Brazil. Today only 250,000 survive. This century 90 indigenous civilisations have disappeared.



conservation plans from alter, without consulting the indigenous peoples in the areas they are protecting.

The need for environmentalists to work alongside indigenous groups — rather than impose conservation plans — will be discussed when 600 representatives of many of the world's 250 million aboriginal people descend on Rio de Janeiro for a historic conference in late May.

Indigenous leaders from every

continent will be at the meeting, which organisers say will be the first of its kind. Conference themes will range from biodiversity and indigenous intellectual property rights to strategies being adopted by aboriginal communities to resist the onslaught of outside cultures and economies.

The meeting's location and timing, just before the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

(UNCED), could not be more appropriate. As governments commemorate the 500th anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of the New World, Indians throughout the Americas have been drawing attention to the genocide, environmental and cultural devastation that followed the arrival of European settlers.

And nowhere is such attention more merited than in Brazil, whose Amazon Basin is the last region in the Western Hemisphere where Amerindian tribes are still being "discovered" and killed off by settlers' diseases and their predatory economic activities.

This past century alone, an average of one Brazilian indigenous civilisation has been destroyed every year. The same process which slashed Brazil's aboriginal population from an estimated five million 500 years ago to fewer than 250,000 last year, continues to this day.

At the same time, the Amazon is also one of the last regions in the world that is still home to uncontacted aboriginal peoples. The National Indian Foundation, Brazil's official agency for indigenous affairs, estimates that about 45 distinct Indian groups in the rainforest have not yet made contact with non-Indian societies — although most are under pressure from settlers or resource-extraction interests, the agency says.

All over the world indigenous societies are under threat. Almost half the world's 6,000 languages — many of them indigenous tongues — are expected to die out within the next century.

Nowadays, environmentalists are more willing to acknowledge that conservation strategies have failed, as with the Pataxo, because they did not account for the needs of aboriginal people living on land they were trying to preserve.

Likewise, Indians fighting

the arrival of resource-extraction interests on their lands are beginning to view environmentalists' money, political clout and public relations skills as assets in their struggles to maintain traditional, subsistence lifestyles. And promising examples of this emerging alliance are beginning to show up in Brazil.

The Kaiapo Indians of Para state, for example, have forged links with environmentalist, church and lawyers' groups to fight plans to dam a river running through their territory. After heavy lobbying by environmentalists, the World Bank quietly withdrew a \$500 million loan that would have helped finance the project, and three years ago, the Brazilian government announced it would suspend the project for ten years.

More recently, environmentalists launched a similar lobbying effort on behalf of the Nambikwara people of the Saraf Indian reserve in Mato Grosso state. They are urging the World Bank to deny a \$204 million loan for a project to be administered by the Mato Grosso government.

The environmentalists say the World Bank should first insist on the removal of thousands of freelance miners who — with the tacit support of the state government — have illegally invaded the reserve, bringing violence, disease, ecological damage and social upheaval.

Anthropologist Darrel Posey, who works with the Kaiapo and will take part in the Rio meeting, argues that if isolated Indian groups are to withstand the onslaught of settlers, mining and logging interests, they will need ways to earn money so they can conduct their own lobbying efforts.

The easiest way for indigenous people to do this, he observes, is to sell off some of the resource wealth in their

territories. This means damaging the environment and compromising their traditional economies and way of life.

Posey argues that enshrining principles of indigenous intellectual property rights in international law would help tribal people to avoid destroying their environment in order to meet their financial needs.

It would allow them to tap into some of the billions of dollars in profits that corporations have amassed through the exploitation of indigenous scientific wisdom in areas such as medicine and pharmacology.

Indigenous and environmental groups are increasingly realising that the struggle to protect indigenous cultures from genocide and assimilation is not simply a matter of humanitarian charity, but one of crucial importance to the survival of the world's ecosystem and humankind as a whole.

Preserving cultural diversity, it is now realised, is key to the preservation of biodiversity — the genetic, species and ecological variations which allow living things, including humans, to adapt to environmental changes.

Says Posey: "With the decimation of each indigenous group, the world loses thousands of years of accumulated knowledge of adaptation to tropical ecosystems."

Ailton Krenak, president of the Union of Indigenous Nations and one of Brazil's best-known Indian spokesmen, says foreign environmentalists are becoming increasingly aware that protection of the environment and of isolated indigenous peoples go hand in hand.

But while environmentalists have served as key allies to South American indigenous peoples in their land-rights struggles, says Krenak, it is time for the movement to broaden their range of activities.

Too often environmentalists from the industrialised North still act "like their governments. They say the Third World needs the sympathy of the First World, but not its wealth."

ALEXANDER NORRIS, a Canadian journalist with the Montreal Gazette, is working with Gemini News Service on a one-year internship.

'Framework' to Resolve Differences

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia laying emphasis on expanding and consolidating bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh has put forward the suggestion of setting up a 'framework' for addressing the differences between our two countries. She said "two neighbours however friendly are bound to have differences" which make it imperative that there be some sort of mechanism that will permit a matured handling of the problems. The Indian Prime Minister during his talks with Begum Zia expressed a similar sentiment when he suggested a new format for maintaining contact among the two countries which will permit more frequent and less ceremonial meetings between their leaders.

The two Prime Ministers' suggestions indicate that there is an urgent need for setting up a system that will put the relations between the two neighbours on an organised footing and prevent ad hoc handling of complex issues. The suggested 'framework' whose shape and form can be worked out later, will help speedy attention to rising problems instead of sitting on them as has so often been the case. The current practice of bureaucratic handling of complex bilateral issues seemed to have prompted the two leaders to suggest increased political contacts. There is now sufficient evidence to suggest that some of the problems between our two countries have been allowed to become complicated essentially because they were left to the bureaucrats to solve them. In this regard the idea for installation of a 'hot-line' between Delhi and Dhaka may be seriously considered, which will enable our two leaders to keep in close touch and be informed about each other's thinking on thorny issues. Given the complex and wide ranging nature of the problems that affect our relations it is necessary that political dialogue between our two countries be increased as much as possible. Ministerial level exchange of views should be expanded with occasional dialogue at the highest political level being made a regular affair. Mr. Narasimha Rao's suggestion for expanding such links to all levels deserves serious consideration.

Small neighbours of big countries naturally feel suspicious of the intentions and aims of their powerful neighbours. Bangladesh's being weary of many of Indian plans specially those dealing with sharing of water is therefore not unusual. Here India will have to understand that the responsibility of creating the atmosphere of trust and co-operation lies on its shoulder. Bangladesh must do its own bit to contribute to that process. India, however, will have to do more than it has so far done to make its small neighbour comfortable. As our Prime Minister said we must resolve 'what separates us' in a spirit of understanding. The word 'understanding' holds the key to the solution of many of our problems. We must go beyond the immediate and the popular view of things and try to get to the root causes of our problems.

Our final judgement on the outcome of the first visit of our new Prime Minister will have to wait. But from all accounts it is clear that they have made a good start. The two leaders appear to have convinced each other of their sincerity and determination to improve bilateral relations. We hope that subsequent development can further strengthen the constructive tone that the two leaders have set.

Developing Indigenous Technology

Indigenously developed technology and scientific innovation are what we want to hear about more and more but actually end up doing so less often. On the rare occasions we are treated with such welcome news, we even do not know how to place the new development in its right perspective and relate its implications to our practical needs later on. One source of such good tiding is Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) that has earned quite an esteem for doing some pioneering works in different fields. Only a few months back came the news from BAU that a teacher of the university developed an easy way for cat fish breeding. Now a seed-cum-fertilizer distributor developed by a student of B.Sc Agricultural Engineering of the same university adds to the array of the university's useful inventions.

With a weight of only 6.5 kg and costing as little as Tk 400 to 500, this simple machine promises to be highly useful to farmers in our local situation. Of the various merits the machine has, the most outstanding are its equal effective performance with seeds of rice, wheat, peas, pulse, mustard, jute and radish, among others, and also with fertilizers including oil-cake powder and ashes in a very short time over a large area. An added advantage of the machine is that it can be operated manually without requiring any training.

Evidently, the machine is a perfect specimen of low-cost indigenous technology and its promotion is the least one could expect from the relevant government agency or department. But one cannot be very sure what fate awaits the invention. Past experiences with such developments of high merits are not so encouraging. But it is not the government alone which can provide necessary fund for commercial production of machine. The fact is that the private entrepreneurs are either shy of such ventures or simply do not see merits in the invention of local origin. The difference between the government and private enterprises is that the former wax eloquent on indigenous research and development of low-cost equipment and the latter are mum on the subject. But on one point both are very particular — they would not simply do enough practically to patronise such efforts and initiative.

Several of the technological invention showing tremendous prospects had to be a thing of the past only because these were not supported either politically or financially. Scientific and technological decisions are linked with political considerations often with undesirable outcomes. This has to come to an end. To develop an indigenous base for low-cost technology what we rather need is to look for the hidden talents who, if given enough support, can richly contribute to the country's scientific and technological needs. Much as the pressure from outside may be on the political decision regarding the development of our indigenous technology, we should now learn to resist it, for there indeed lies our future.

THE question that often troubles us is — why the South lagged behind while the North prospered. Is it simply because the South failed to show their collective will to encounter threats from outside or have they been victims of circumstances that followed in sudden succession — overwhelming their civilization — finally condemning them into the endless abyss of perpetual retardation in their social, cultural, economic, spiritual and intellectual faculties? Though basically an agrarian society, Bangladesh (a typical example of the third world countries), for instance, has shown its genius in international trade and commerce in its preinvasion era. It was a prospering civilization not only in economic terms but it has shown its capacity to generate and preserve a very rich cultural and religious heritage. (The book, *Platipus of the Earth* sea, for example, testifies to the fact in detail.) Despite all the plus points mentioned, this civilization, however, had serious setbacks. As said before it was basically an agrarian society, therefore, the struggle of its people centered around the elements of nature, not against their counterparts, while those nations that prospered were subject to adverse conditions; circumstances forced them into confrontations between groups and clans for possession of resources that were short in supply. So they mastered the tools and techniques of armed conflict. When they swept across this land they went virtually unopposed. V S Naipaul in his "India: A Wounded Civilization" observes, "No civilization was so little equipped to cope with the outside world, no country was so easily raided and plundered, and learned so little from its disasters". Thus, the

process of intimidation and oppression began resulting in destruction and disruption of its total socio-economic fabric. Before these incursions — the realisation of its people as a separate collective entity was loosely perceived. The nationalistic fervour of the people ultimately found forceful expression in their struggle against their subjugators.

Through a series of revolts and uprisings, the conquerors and colonists were subsequently overthrown but unfortunately their system that engineered the process of exploitation prevailed and still prevails. So far no measures whatever, has been good enough to remove the ills of the systems that we inherited. As Tariq Ali, a well known Pakistani journalist puts it, "All the demagogical miasma and ideological henna could not pacify the beast-namely the social formation of Pakistan. This reality is applicable not only to the case of Bangladesh or this subcontinent but with certain adjustments this can fairly be extended to a lot of countries in the South as well."

After the Second World War President Truman's Marshal plan helped effectively to salvage the economy of war devastated Europe; but all the economic assistance to the South has fallen far short of its objective. The reason is quite clear — the economic assistance under the Marshal plan was directed towards those nations who were highly advanced in terms of technology and they evolved an effective and efficient system in utilizing and implementing resources obtained to its fullest effect while South still does possess neither the technological know nor the capacity to manage resources. As a result what followed turned out to be disastrous, to say the

least. Today, in the South, the survival of the total socio-political-economic structure of the nations mostly depends upon the assistance from the North. Despite continuous aid-flow, development in real terms is no where to be seen, while dependency on the North not only seems to perpetuate but also continues to aggravate.

This should not and cannot go on forever. There should be a fundamental change of outlook, attitudes and actions from both the quarters.

Any worthwhile change calls for reassessing the areas of roles and responsibility through mutual cooperation. This will require two-way information exchange, setting of pragmatic objectives, determination of strategy and logistic support, and most of all present global institutional arrangements that in fact determine the nature and characteristic of relation between the North and the South needs to be closely reviewed. The latter point carries additional weightage because present intricate nature of institutional arrangements in fact retards the process of fruitful dialogue. The total development of mankind as Prof. Bronowski likes to put it, has taken shape gradually in the form of stratified development — that is development in succession by phases — from simple to complex. But the change in the institutional arrangements that we are seeking should take a reverse turn from complex to simple by phases — designed to deal effectively with the complexes of development related issues involving the North and the South. Therefore, ways and means should be explored to restructure the

present institutional arrangements to keep its simple approach.

As a starter we should evolve a mechanism of information flow directed to initialise a process of inter-exchange of knowledge, experience and mutual accountability. Since the North is far ahead of the South in terms of expertise, technology, resources and organizational capabilities, therefore, we expect North to be the prime mover of change.

At present, we have insufficient information to ascertain the future guidelines of action based upon clear-cut demarcation regarding responsibilities and contribution of the North and South. Those of us working in the water and sanitation sector in Bangladesh are largely if not completely in the dark about the institutional methods and mechanisms that determines the relationship between us and our partners in the North; we presume our partners in the South are more or less suffering from similar ignorance.

Therefore, before exerting ourselves to find our responsibilities and contribution there is a need to introduce ourselves more intimately and discreetly. The International Forum for Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation formed during UNDP sponsored Global Consultation at Delhi, can take the initiative to start gathering information about the various concerned parties that include NGOs, governments, bilateral, multilateral and ESAs by creating a separate Data Bank. In the subsequent stages this Forum can initiate a democratic process for decision making based on the principle of partnership and mutual respect.

This will help to initialise effectively a new North-South dialogue that will lead to concrete actionplans translatable into practice under present or new institutional arrangements. We feel this is the single most important factor that will automatically result in deciding the respective responsibilities and contributions of the North and the South. We feel that it is high time to take the initiative in detailing out the ground work to start worthwhile North-South dialogue in water and sanitation by mutual identification of problems and prospects, issues, and options. Therefore, the idea that we would like to assert is — let "glasnost" come first and "perestroika" will automatically follow.

Given the fact that indigenous NGOs have expanded, and fundamental shift has been marked from the northern to southern NGOs as the leaders of the development process in the third world, "NGOs should now play decisive role in priority setting, project approval and evaluation of performance, and allow their indigenous partners in the South a far greater deliberative as opposed to advisory role in decision making. Such advocates believe that full and effective partnership between international and indigenous NGOs require delegation by funding agencies in the North of authority to their counterparts in the South to make decisions regarding resource allocation, accountability procedures and project performance evaluation. In so doing, the argument goes, not only would indigenous NGOs be given the respect and full trust they deserve, but decision making and oversight would be brought nearer to the local needs and realities of the grassroots poor in developing countries. Moreover, international NGOs — freed from such administrative burdens could devote more of their own time and energies to fundraising, development education and legislative advocacy work at home on behalf of developing country needs and priorities (Brian H. Smith, An Agenda of future tasks for international and indigenous NGOs: Views from the North).

The ideas regarding the contents of awareness programme aimed at the people in both the North and the South should start at highest level where policies are formulated. There should be a pool of experts representing both the North and South to decide the guidelines and detailing its implementation. This pool should not merely play advisory role, instead they

should be given the resources and discretionary power to start implementing such programmes within a definite time frame. Here also, the fundamental problem (specially for the South) that we presently face is the need for adequate information about the existing system responsible for building awareness of the people both in the North and the South. We feel that North should take the initiative in providing us with the adequate information and knowledge so that we in the South can effectively reciprocate.

We also have to consider the fact that the idea of NGOs in development has evolved from the concept of additionality for enhancing the development initiatives in the society. Therefore, specifically, we in the South cannot, and should not preclude our respective governments from our endeavours. Rather we should find ways and means to effectively support and complement government programmes as they continue to remain our biggest partners in development within our countries. So the role of government should be seriously considered and its methods of functioning cannot go unaccounted while we sketch out our future courses of actions.

We strongly feel that it will be very difficult, if not impossible, for the present Advisory Committee alone to handle the wide ranges of issues in water and sanitation involving the North and the South. Therefore, we would like to suggest that this committee be extended into various subcommittees on permanent basis assigned with specific tasks. We would also like to see this forum evolve a mechanism so that in future its function will not continue to remain merely as advisory and a platform for information exchange. We expect this forum will actively participate in the ultimate decision making in the total development process of water and sanitation globally.

Finally, for any idea to take shape, it is the first impulse of thought that matters most in deciding its outcome-good or evil. Throughout history we have seen evil ideas like Nazism and Fascism have been theorised, given a rational semblance and organised very intelligently that ultimately led mankind into the "endless vistas of fathomless catastrophe". Ideas may be wrongly perceived, plans can be poorly executed, but that does not and cannot negate progress — it is the first thought, the first intention based upon mutual trust and respect that can only save our day.

To the Editor...

Dish antenna

Sir, The government decision to permit the import, manufacture and use of the Dish Antenna is unfortunate.

It will enable invasion of the film and horror culture of America which is eroding the social values in the developed world.

It will promote corruption which is wrecking the economy and spur the greed and temptation of the elements in the society who vie with each other for pleasure and social climbing.

It will demonstrably whet the existing rancour between

the privileged class and the deprived ones.

There are many other ways in which the country's scanty resources and labour could be gainfully pressed into services of the people.

Anarkali
Ispahani Colony, Dhaka.

Just and loyal

Sir, What the 'Drishtikon' programme of BTV had shown on the night of May 15 is an ugly facade of our society and the poor condition of our law and order situation. The terrific and horrible incidents of

Kalyanpur reminds us about our social and religious obligations. Are we discharging them?

I am sure that almost all the leaders of our political parties had witnessed the TV reports on the terrorist activities so far carried out by certain influential criminals of the area. I think, our esteemed political leaders have a great responsibility to perpetuate respect and regard for law and the law enforcing agencies among their respective party members and general people.

So, the political leaders and activists do have a divine responsibility to help the gov-

ernment establish law and justice in the society by extending active support and cooperation, ignoring political differences. Perhaps the readers would agree that certain influential people are taking advantage of the political differences to expand their crime kingdom and to increase their wealth power.

Of course, we don't need over-loyal or less-loyal police or other public servants but highly dedicated and only loyal officials.

M Zahidul Hoque
Assistant Professor,
Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka.