

For a Green Movement in Bangladesh

by Noazesh Ahmed

Thailand after Suchinda

The resignation of Gen Suchinda Kraprayoon as Prime Minister of Thailand, the public apology offered by the much-despised army leader for the killing of some 47 pro-democracy protesters, the dissolution of the coalition government and the declaration of amnesty for army officers and soldiers who had fired on demonstrators create a typical Thai scenario for the resolution of a volatile political solution. The key to this solution is "forgive and forget". The stage is now set for a session of the parliament which will discuss, debate and eventually approve amendments to the constitution, one of which will make it obligatory for the next Prime Minister to be an elected member of the lower house which Gen Suchinda was not. So, as the country has known in the past, there will be yet another package of compromises and adjustments. And, then, it will be "business as usual" for one of the most affluent countries in South East Asia.

The question that has cropped up this time: Will this compromise work? For one thing, with so many pro-democracy demonstrators killed by the army in a brutal crackdown ordered by Gen Suchinda, the spirit of "forgive and forget" may well have disappeared from many minds. Those who are visiting temples, as some did yesterday in Dhaka, to pray for the departed souls, have reasons to feel bitter and angry, seeking punishment for those who killed protesters. It is no good telling the Thais that the crackdown, resulting in the killing of so many demonstrators, was essential for the restoration of law and order.

The crisis in Thailand has been only temporarily resolved, temporarily because until amendments to the constitution are approved, one would not know if the Thais accept the political solution. Meanwhile, protests against amnesty will continue, until the Rule of Law is put into effect to punish the offenders.

The aftermath of the crisis is bound to have a long-term affect not only on Thailand but also on the South East Asia as a whole. There are some clear writings on the walls which governments, committed to economic progress of their countries, can hardly overlook. It is obvious that the educated middle class in most of these countries, which has so far made the best of the rise in its standard of living wants to be directly involved in its own political destiny, instead of letting either the army or short-sighted professional politicians decide the course of events. In Indonesia, officials have already indicated that President Suharto has agreed to revoke a decree that gives him sweeping powers in running the country, the decree that goes back to 1966 when he first assumed powers. Meanwhile, political activists in Kuala Lumpur have started predicting that a growing demand for political openness and participation will soon become more vocal in most countries of the region, which, despite their so-called democratic constitutions, operate under all kinds of restrictions. There is no certainty what the call for a change will remain confined to Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia. The wind will — and, we believe, should — reach Myanmar. At some stage, it will also reach South Asia, perhaps even Bangladesh, when people will start asking themselves how democracy can function better than before, with increased participation of the electorate in the decision-making process for the good of the country as a whole.

The Unfunny Faces of Shishu Park

Much is amiss with the Shishu Park. The Daily Star revealed on Thursday that almost all of its mechanical contraptions offering different kinds of fun rides, specially the popular Ferris Wheel, have outlived their safety warranty period by two years. Bad maintenance has compounded this fact to make things highly risky for children. In point of fact, all the visitors to the park are not children, which is another of the many things wrong there, and as many adult visitors unknowingly step into the dangerous traps there as do the children. If not more.

Lack of any thoughts about replacement and modernisation is built into the scheme of things of most Bangladesh enterprises and undertakings. We advisedly refrain from pointing at the lack of research in everything that at one point of time or another seems to be going fine as a necessary and useful cog in the wheel that is our state and society. For all such cogs we import in finished packages and not even in a CKD condition which could save much money and compel us to go for a little tinkering leading to a better understanding of these things — which research is all about. Well, we buy the Ferris Wheel and the merry-go-rounds and the toy trains etc. in perfectly park-worthy condition and run them down to unworthy states without doing much about prolonging their life or throwing out parts or wholes out of the window if found unserviceable. Here is where the whole thing is fundamentally flawed. But this is far from unique — the affairs of the state and government, of our collective existence, so to say, is flawed in the same manner. Without going for effecting a radical and wholesale change of the situation, which is neither practicable nor possible, one could take a good leap forward by taking the prospective victims of the Shishu Park contraptions into confidence and make public the dire facts. The Daily Star story has done that. This we say hazarding a bit of bashful self-patting.

The Dhaka Shishu Park is the only recreation park for children in the country. Why? There are, of course, many more spots wearing signs of Shishu Park strewn around the urban centres of Bangladesh, — and some of them are in Dhaka too. But they have nothing to substantiate their claim to the name. What was the point — the policy — behind setting up one simple juvenile recreation park for the whole of the country? And why was "learning" totally counted out from "playing" when planning this lone ranger? You have nothing there to induce or entice the child to take interest in things leading to greater and deeper joys and achievements of life. Just fun is no fun. What was this Ramna showpiece modelled on?

The insinuation of corruption ridding the small body of the 83-crew park that earns 80 lakh a year, is quite in keeping with the unhealthy entry yard — crowded by sellers of the dirtiest food one can conceive of — and their wares. The nation wouldn't surely have died if the one and only Shishu Park was not built by a military dictator. If we want to keep it, feeling that the nation's children deserve at least this, we must keep it properly. And build at least a hundred others with more sincerity and imagination than making a deal with a contractor and taking hefty kickback.

WE live in a period of burgeoning awareness of the conflict between our activities and environmental constraints. The Greenhouse Effect has recently been a global concern, sometime without understanding its real significance. It is however obvious that human activities are transforming not only local and regional, but the global environment as well. These global changes have many faces: ozone depletion, tropical deforestation, desertification, acid depletion, and increased atmospheric concentration of gases that trap heat and may warm global climate and change in precipitation patterns.

Humans have disrupted the natural carbon cycle by burning fossil fuels for energy and by clearing forest and homestead trees to feed and house growing population. Yearly about 22 million hectares of forests in the world are lost to logging, farming and pasturing. Industrial and agricultural emissions raise atmospheric carbon dioxide by about seven billion metric tons per year. Roughly half is absorbed by the ocean biomass and by land vegetation and soils. To remove the 3.5 billion tons of carbon added annually to atmosphere, it would require an area of about 500 million hectares to be planted by forest. Over the past several decades, scientists' understanding of the complexities of the earth system has evolved to the point where they now recognize that the components of the system — the atmosphere, oceans, land, and associated living beings including humans are intricately intertwined. A change in one part of the earth system has repercussions for other parts — often in ways that are neither obvious nor immediately apparent.

To dramatize the above scenario many environmental scientists, politicians and policy makers phrase it, "One Earth, One Future." Broadly, this concept has a long-range beneficial significance. But it has also many misgivings, particularly in countries where they like to depend heavily on others for capital, advice and development. Bangladesh is one of such countries. This deltaic small country, one of the most densely populated in the world, has many inherent problems and weaknesses: high illiteracy, depressed economy, is prone to drought and flood and has its fragile coastal zone. This condition forces the country to exploit its natural resources at maximum without vigorous effort for regenerating those. As a result, in course of few decades tree coverage has come down to a very low level. Canals and rivers are silted by eroded materials. Per capita production of fruit, vegetable and oils, fish and meat is the lowest in Asia. This situation weakens the socio-economic structure, rural institution and environmental balance.

The global concept overshadows the prevailing and latent man-made environmental problems at grassroots level. Both the Government and private organizations generally find an excuse by blaming others and doing very little to avert or solve the problems. This is not to say that we should not rally with the Global Environmental Movement. What we should do first is to have a 'clean your own house first' approach. In other words, we should execute our own programmes which do not need external

What we should do first is to have a 'clean your own house first' approach. In other words, we should execute our own programmes which do not need external assistance. This is really a self-reliance and sustainable development programme. Many of our major environmental problems are local and created by our own activities and meddling.

assistance. This is really a self-reliance and sustainable development programme. Many of our major environmental problems are local and created by our own activities and meddling.

At the beginning of the century, Rabindranath Tagore observed the degradation of rural life and its environment in his masterly narrative: 'We have forgotten to grace our village with loving attention and decoration by trees for a long time. As a consequence, we have lost beauty, health, education and joy. Today our ponds are dry, air is polluted, road is wadded, store is empty, social bond is loose; jealousy and conflicts are making the society weaker every day. No more time is left in our graceless country the rule of evil force is establishing its roots deeper.'

Urgent Task

At the beginning of the century, Rabindranath Tagore observed the degradation of rural life and its environment in his masterly narrative: 'We have forgotten to grace our village with loving attention and decoration by trees for a long time. As a consequence, we have lost beauty, health, education and joy. Today our ponds are dry, air is polluted, road is wadded, store is empty, social bond is loose; jealousy and conflicts are making the society weaker every day. No more time is left in our graceless country the rule of evil force is establishing its roots deeper.'

At the beginning of the century, Rabindranath Tagore observed the degradation of rural life and its environment in his masterly narrative: 'We have forgotten to grace our village with loving attention and decoration by trees for a long time. As a consequence, we have lost beauty, health, education and joy. Today our ponds are dry, air is polluted, road is wadded, store is empty, social bond is loose; jealousy and conflicts are making the society weaker every day. No more time is left in our graceless country the rule of evil force is establishing its roots deeper.'

The Dust Bowl' experience of 1930's in America also remains another vivid lesson on the folly of destruction of forest trees and overgrazing. Reforestation and improved method of cultivation has turned this Great Plains again into a fertile and most productive wheat growing land in the world.

Like the Europeans, and Americans, Asian green crusaders or environmental activists are also very active over the last decade. They have already made a significant impact in Hongkong, Indonesia, Thailand, India, Japan and Malaysia. To mention few, even with 40% tree coverage, Thailand was compelled to ban logging country wide by public pressure in 1990. Strong resistance has been launched against World Bank financed gigantic Normada Multi purpose project in India. Malaysian greens recently have pushed loggers from the Endau-Rompin rainforest, stooped construction of two major dams and blocked a chemical waste dump in Perak state. The Korean Anti Pollution Movement called for a nationwide boycott in April last year. South Korea's first, against Doosan's billion dollars food and beverage subsidiary. The company was found dumping massive amounts of toxic chemicals into the Naktong-river. Over 28,000 supermarkets removed Doosan's products from their shelves.

Recently, public pressures are getting so strong that many governments in Asia are indeed beginning to take notice and take action against pollu-

tion. In Indonesia, the Environment Ministry sued 500 firms in eleven of the country's 27 provinces for failing to install treatment for waste water in June last year. The Japan Tropical Forest Action Network (JATFAN) has made a significant contribution to stop rainforest destruction by the Japanese firms in Southeast Asia. The Report made by the JATFAN a citizen organization — told of destruction of Philippine forests and unchecked cutting in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, and Papua New Guinea. The Network invited Sarawak tribals to join in, marshalled the press in front of Morubeni Corp., a major Japanese hardwood importer. This movement has saved many forests in the Southeast Asia.

Why not a strong Green Movement should also be launched by the conscious citizens on Bangladesh Soil? Let us start the Movement right now on the basis of national emergency. The conscious citizens and NGO's should get together for seeding the Green Movement all over the country. Let the government agencies support the Movement by supplying seedlings of appropriate tree species and required inputs and amending necessary land legality.

As a first step every citizen should plant and maintain a tree which we need so badly for soothing our environs. If we cannot execute this task sooner, we may fail to save our already sick environment. Thereby we may not bequeath a place to live for our future generations.

The author, Dr Noazesh Ahmed, is a distinguished agricultural scientist and photographer of international repute. He works as consultant to the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and FAO.

Nigeria Lurches toward Democracy as its People Become Poorer

Bayo Onanuga writes from Lagos

The military regime that governs Nigeria is promising to hand over power to a democratically-elected civilian government in January, but the country's chaotic economy is threatening to disrupt the smooth transition. Gemini News Service reports on the riots, strikes, and other problems facing the troubled President Ibrahim Babangida.



PRESIDENT IBRAHIM BABANGIDA Struggling to cope with economic chaos

Nigeria may still witness more unrest before January's handover of power. University teachers and workers are threatening new strikes if the government does not move fast enough to halt declining living standards.

The government gave 25 million Naira (about \$1.35 million) to each federal university in April, but it appears the money is not enough for their needs.

In the seven years of President Ibrahim Babangida's regime, Nigeria's universities have lost a third of their brightest lecturers to Europe, America and other buoyant African countries. More teachers are leaving, while student enrolment has increased from 135,000 in 1985 to about 200,000 in 1991.

Even the army appears no longer in solid support of the military regime. Although the government recently spent more than a billion Naira to buy cars as gifts for military officers, speculations in recent weeks — quickly debunked by the government — have told of attempted coups in the army and the secret trials of those involved.

In May, the army took the unusual step of buying a full-

page advertisement in the government-controlled Daily Times, enjoining soldiers to remain steadfast in their support for government and discounting suggestions that the Babangida regime wanted to perpetuate itself in power.

Two months later, that goal is yet to be achieved and foreign creditors are expected to call in an estimated \$5 billion debt due for payment this year. Prices responded crazily to the devaluation, and hyperinflation has resulted, with wages remaining static and buying power plummeting.

As a public relations ploy, President Babangida did not get all the dividends he wanted. Two former military leaders of Nigeria who have publicly criticised Babangida stayed away, and some of those leaders who did attend deplored the hardship in the country and asked Babangida to bring succour to the people.

Now, Babangida is faced with further controversy from the recent census, which put the country's northern population at 6 million greater than the South. Some states are already disputing the figures and one has headed to the courts for redress. Analysts predict some unguarded reactions as the census figures are tied to political power and revenue sharing.

And when the presidential primary election is held in August, there will be more than 60 contestants. Will the losers accept the verdict of the voters?

Eight months before power is transferred, the survival of the Babangida regime will depend on how it is able to manoeuvre itself through the threatening flashpoints of trouble.

BAYO ONANUGA is a Nigerian freelance journalist.

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.

Electric bills

Sir, The honest and regularly paying consumers are facing immense trouble to get the correct electric bills in time from the PDB/DESA meter readers. In most cases they do not go to the spot for meter reading. Rather they cook the meter reading and issue estimated bill for payment, which is very far from actual readings. In most cases when actual reading is taken, it is found to exceed the 200 units limit at lower rate. So the customers are to pay at the higher rate (exceeding 200 units), which occurred due to sending of estimated bills in previous months. To avoid this the customers are to run to the electric office with meter readings at the end of each month. This sort of practice is also not liked by the bill makers.

To avoid such problems all customers should be supplied with self-billing books, to prepare their own bills and present to the bank concerned (like that of gas bill). The meter readers should from time to time check the bill books, if those are noted as per meter readings, if the bills were prepared as per rates of the DESA, etc. Before supply of Bill Book underwritings may be taken from the customers that they would pay the bills under self-billing system regularly as per rates declared by the DESA, failing which they would be ready to face the disconnection of line. This system may be tried, with the conditions followed rigidly by the domestic consumers.

M S Haq
Mohammadpur, Dhaka.

Unlimited lawlessness

Sir, Mr Shameem Ahmad's tirade (Star, Opinion, May 18) against the flourishing of unbridled lawlessness in the

country is a matter of great concern to all peace loving citizens.

But the politicians and the government do not seem to be concerned at all. Or, the government is utterly incapable of taking deterrent measures for democracy to be practised in a law-abiding manner.

Why the authorities allow hartals to disrupt services at national level, such as blocking of national highways, uprooting of rails, etc? These offences should be made punishable by law.

According to my amateurish understanding, I hold the politicians responsible for not discouraging or rather encouraging non-democratic practices to serve their own ends. It is time the union leaders are also warned publicly that they would not be allowed to indulge in activities which are not in public interest; otherwise they would be arrested, to face the court of law.

What price we are paying for "popularity"? What is wrong with being tough with the misguided "leaders" who misuse their leadership? The show of numbers on a wrong procedure cannot make the procedure right. "Bichar chai" should apply against the wrong leaders also, political or otherwise. At present, they

know they can get away with almost anything, backed by frenzied "supporters" or followers.

The government should squarely face such illegal showdowns by the undesirable elements, and ruthlessly crush all unlawful activities which are indulged in the name of "democracy".

Routine life should go on in spite of all hartals. The non-hartal citizens have the democratic right to carry on non-violent routine outdoor activities, without supporting any of the hartal parties or groups.

What right have the hartal groups got to coerce the whole nation to take part in their activities? Why others have no right to differ? How disruption is democratic?

If a person, vehicle or shop is attacked, or a blockade is set up, the police should stop it forthwith (these are not "strike" activities), and use force if necessary, if other measures fail, such as lathi charge, and the use of tear gas. Half-hearted measures never work with those who deliberately plan disruption activities to achieve their ends. It appears that the government can never get the upper hand, and drag the situation into long negotiations, while the whole nation suffers from indecision

of the law enforcing agencies. In which country do we see the police acting as mere spectators?

How can the government allow the rule of the jungle to prevail? Why situations get out of the control of the authorities? If we have a government, where is it hiding? The citizens are fed up with this type of life in Bangladesh. Don't ask me to leave the country!

Alif Zabr
Dhaka.

Balanced friendship

Sir, There is none or least people who will differ that a real friend is the best asset of life. To me "give and take" is a thing of vital necessity for people to live in this troubled world. It very much pricks my mind that what is the utility of a good friend if it fails to render active assistance to a friend in adversity. The saying goes, "A friend in need is a friend indeed." A friend, if he is a real friend, cannot remain passive when he finds his friend in the grip of distress. I am in full agreement when one says "Money can never nourish any friendship, rather it helps destroying friend's goodwill." It aptly reminds the quote — "I had my money and my

friend.

I lent my money to my friend.

I asked my money of my friend.

I lost my money and my friend."

But despite all the above sayings, may I ask one question — whether in a society where men are to live together can they shun the idea of seeking co-operation of friend or can one keep himself indifferent when his friend is in distress and trying hard to keep his existence? If I do fail to get the assistance of a friend when I need most, what is the use of my having such a friend at all? In this problematic and trouble-ridden society, living alone and self-centred is rather a curse and the possible and positive assistance from a friend in distress is perhaps a matter of considerable significance without which the world and the society we live in will be virtually unfit for human habitation. And how one can be called a good friend if he chooses to keep his eyes shut when his friend needs his assistance to come out of the distress he is in? Thus a "balanced friendship" is the desired thing indeed.

S M Hussain
Mipur, Dhaka.