

## Defence Cut for Development

The concern of the international community over the continuing increase in military expenditures in South Asia has been reiterated by a senior official of a major aid agency. During an interview to this paper, William R Thomson, a Vice President of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) expressed the view that South Asia is the only region in this continent where "growth in military expenditure was higher than the growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) during the decade of the eighties." True, as the visiting ADB official pointed out, in the last couple of years, some steps have been taken to slow down the rise, but the proportion of this "non-productive expenditure" to the development budget was still large when compared to that of other developing countries in Asia, accounting for anything between 15 and 30 per cent of a country's overall budget.

In this respect, India and Pakistan are the worst offenders. However, other South Asian countries, like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal, must also look at their own defence budgets seriously and see where some cuts can be made and the saving diverted to development.

Thomson brought up this subject only a few weeks after James Grant, the Executive Secretary of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) had told The Daily Star that the rate of increase in military expenditure in South Asia was higher than that in other regions. In this context he supported the position taken by many other experts that international assistance to a developing country should be linked to the size of the reduction in its military budget.

One wonders if countries concerned take any note of these warnings. According to a report just published by a New Delhi daily, the Economic Times, India has been negotiating with Israel for bringing in advanced weapons systems as well as for collaboration with Tel Aviv in other areas of military technology. Whether Pakistan or, for that matter, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka are not also engaged in similar negotiations with other countries may be a matter of speculation. But a bit of investigative reporting, like what we see in the columns of the Economic Times, may well reveal a good deal more than what we expect.

What is hardly a matter of speculation is the fact that the three South Asian countries — India, Pakistan and Bangladesh — rank among the largest beneficiaries of international assistance, with a lot of it provided as soft or interest-free loans and outright grants. What would offend the sensitivities of many nations is the fact that massive aid, running close to \$5 billion a year for these three South Asian countries, would be coming from the share of several impoverished African countries or island states in the Pacific which have kept their military expenses under control.

All these three South Asian countries, and of course Nepal and the Maldives, would now be seeking further assistance to deal their environmental problems from the fund likely to be set up by the Earth Summit in Rio. Such an expectation is perfectly justified. However, we should not blame the international community or the aid agencies for asking these countries to put a halt to the rise in their defence expenditures, to start with, and to begin demonstrating that their saving from defence cut is going into development, say, to support programmes for Education for All or for better health and better life for millions in what still remains to be one of the poorest regions in the world.

## Censor and the Arts

After months of protests and petitions, young short-film director Abu Sayeed's 'Dhushar Jatra' was finally allowed to be screened to the general public this week. The interest generated by the 30-minute long film, based on experiences of a village during the War of Liberation of 1971, was not due to any path-breaking artistic achievement of the director nor to any outstanding technical breakthrough made by the film. It was the action of the Bangladesh Board of Film Censors which caused the public outcry. The Board refused to release the film on grounds which may have been "logical" in a totalitarian state or under an autocratic regime, but certainly not in a democratic polity.

Practically all the objections of the Board were politically-motivated and made from the narrow confines of a highly-partisan viewpoint. Fortunately, the Appeals Board took due note of the public discontent with the Board's high handedness and released the film without inflicting any further damage on the democratic character of the state.

The Dhushar Jatra saga has clearly demonstrated, if it ever needed any demonstration, the dangers inherent in a policy which seeks to "regulate" cultural and artistic activities. When the state gives itself the power to decide what is or what isn't good for the public in terms of art and culture, then the result can never be a good one. A censor board made up of bureaucrats or people appointed because of their political allegiance invariably has a habit of making decisions which are designed to "insulate" the public from other views. That, unfortunately, was what happened with Dhushar Jatra, and that is something that must not be allowed to happen again. After all, if we accept such practices in the case of short-films today, might they not expand to other areas in the near future, areas such as books, theatres, painting?

In present-day Bangladesh, nobody would seriously protest if the Board objected to scenes of indecency without artistic value or scenes which seek to glorify criminality or mindless violence. But the Board should not try to impose its political judgement on what is essentially a work of art. Simply put, the public has a right to see any film that does not offend common social values related to sex and mindless violence. And the censor board has no right to deny the people that right.

# Analysts Debate US Role in New World Order

Kevin J Kelley writes from New York

**A debate is raging in the US about the foreign policy that Washington should pursue in the post-Cold War era. While isolationists claim that the country should put America first and disengage from a global role, many progressive sections argue that the US needs to be in the forefront of world politics but be less violent in its dealings with the Third World. Gemini News Service reports from one such recent debate.**

As a US taxpayer and as a progressive citizen, she declared, it was both her right and obligation to insist that the government act morally and positively in its dealings with the world.

Were the US somehow to retreat within its own borders, Burkhalter continued, there would be no reason to expect an enlightened global policy from other nations, such as Germany and the "tigers" of Asia, that would surely move to fill the power vacuum. It is far wiser, she suggested, for US leftists to pressure their own government to act decently abroad.

"Some of the worst foreign policy disasters of recent decades have been brought to a halt by citizen action," Burkhalter observed, citing the cases of the Vietnam war, US-funded civilian extermination campaigns in Central America, and the "constructive engagement" approach to apartheid.

Leftists advocate their political responsibility by urging isolationism, argued conference host Joanne Landy, thus leaving the way open for radical right-wing populists like Patrick Buchanan and David Duke.

Landy serves as director of the Campaign for Peace and Democracy, which sponsored the day-long event, entitled,

"Toward a New US Foreign Policy: Promoting Democracy and Social Justice."

At least one participant, Janet Fleischman of Africa Watch, departed from the conference's consensus by observing that the foreign policy can sometimes be considered commendable, even when it is George Bush who is giving the orders.

Fleischman pointed to US Ambassador Smith Hempstone's outspoken advocacy of democracy in Kenya. Hempstone has consistently sided with Kenyan dissidents in their efforts to achieve multiparty democracy in that country.

Fleischman further noted the State Department's forceful condemnation of the Arab-dominated government of Mauritania, which has murdered scores of blacks in northwest Africa. The State Department's turnaround on Eritrea, with top African affairs policymaker Herman Cohen now acknowledging the territory's right to independence, might likewise have been mentioned in this regard.

Congress's decision to terminate all military aid to Zairean dictator Mobutu Sese Seko serves as another example, though unnoted, exam-

ploring the fact that in recent years important segments of the Washington establishment have lent support to democratic forces in the Philippines, the Soviet Union, China and some Latin American countries.

Most speakers took the premise that the US foreign policy apparatus is monolithic.



A humane diplomacy in post-cold war world?

Differing interests among economic and political power centres were not taken into account by the various presenters.

Edward said, a Columbia University professor and writer, insisted that the US must be seen as an imperialist power. Although that term has disappeared from the American political vocabulary, "imperialism is what accounts for Washington's consistently abhorrent behaviour toward the Third World," he argued.

But the Palestinian rights activists did not indict the US economic system as the catalyst for the foreign aggression of successive administrations. In that sense, even Said provided no counterpoint to the conference's general avoidance of Marxist terminology and analysis.

The author of "The Question of Palestine" did, however, challenge those leftists who oppose US foreign policy everywhere except the Middle East. He called the issue of Palestinian self-determination "the touchstone case for human rights and a correct foreign policy."

Said appeared to believe that his assertion might be considered heretical, or at least controversial, by some of his audience, but no one rose in defence of Israel's refusal to

consider an independent Palestinian state.

This was clearly an assembly of leftists. The 200 individuals attending the conference would probably have had little trouble agreeing, as one workshop speaker put it, that "we already know Bush is a stinker and that the US is up to no good."

Fireworks lit up the New School firmament only during one of the panel sessions. Not surprisingly, given the concurrent rioting in Los Angeles, it was an allegation of racism that provided the spark.

Michael Simmons, a black staffer with the American Friends Service Committee, suggested that the US progressive movement would do well to examine the racism within its ranks.

This remark was prompted by the composition of the conference audience, which was almost monochromatically white. Racism is also a root factor in the formulation of US foreign policy, Simmons said.

It would be viewed as ludicrous, he observed, for Peru and Colombia to claim, even in theory, that they have a right to destroy the tobacco fields of north Carolina. But few white Americans doubt that the US would be justified in setting fire to the coca fields of South America, Simmons noted.

Similarly, he added, India, Bangladesh and Ethiopia might lay claim to the wheat of Kansas with as much validity as the US secures for itself the oil of the Gulf.

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## ROAD TO RIO — III

# The Outcome of the Earth Summit Will be Most Significant for Bangladesh

A M A Muhith writes from New York



**This is the concluding article of the three-part series on the Earth Summit by a former Finance Minister of Bangladesh, a guest columnist of The Daily Star.**

ON institutional issues a good number of targets and programme may ultimately be agreed to. But agreements on institutional and financial arrangements are a long way off. It is not for lack of ideas that there is difficulty in setting up appropriate arrangements. In fact, there is an abundance of ideas and a surfeit of proposals. An Earth Council like a Security Council for global economy and ecology, a Commission on sustainable development, a World Court on environment and all such grandiose ideas have been worked out in considerable detail. Special attention from ECOSOC and International Court of Justice are also considered as more down to earth alternatives.

More difficult is the issue of financing the environment revolution, an idea which is yet to fire the imagination of world leaders. Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute speaks of an environment revolution in the coming century much like the industrial revolution that changed the world in the last three hundred years or like the earlier agricultural revolution. The annual additional investment needed for the environment revolution to move forward is considered to be about \$10 billion. The Global Environment Facility set up only last year with a funding of just over a billion dollars (including associated funds) marks a very humble beginning. The Facility is jointly operated by World Bank, UNDP and UNEP and it was created to address investments designed to arrest global warming, destruction of biodiversity, pollution of international waters and depletion of the ozone layer. There are new ideas about a Green Fund or specific funds for specific conventions. The real problem is not the mechanism but the commitment to provide the extra costs for the environment revolution.

INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS: Adopting international conventions for the environment is not a new development. Switzerland tried for an European Convention to protect the nesting rights of migratory birds as early as 1872. I have personally been associated with the Treaty on International Trade in Endangered Species of World Flora and Fauna. As a newly independent country Bangladesh participated in drafting the Convention. The Antarctica Treaty was signed in 1959 and a second agreement in 1991 goes a long way in protecting the last piece of uninhabited area of the globe. London Dumping Convention of 1972 took measures to prevent sea pollution. In 1989 in a similar vein the Basel Convention was adopted to regulate the export of hazardous wastes. In Rio it is likely that a Biological Treaty on preserving the world's plant, animal and micro-biological species will be signed. Three important conventions negotiated in recent times are the Law of the Sea Treaty of 1982, Convention on Long Range Transboundary Air Pollution of 1979 and the Montreal Protocol on Ozone Depletion of 1987. Negotiations of treaties are very difficult because even with all the goodwill, perceptions of conflict between national gains and losses and global good do not disappear easily. This is what is preventing consensus on Agenda 21.

### The Concept of Global Commons

The Law of the Sea Treaty is most remarkable in many ways. It took more than a decade to thrash out the Treaty. But even then the ratification of the Treaty has foundered so far on the rock of International Seabed Authority. But the Treaty did a great service to

humanity by proclaiming that the oceans beyond the territorial waters are "a common heritage of mankind." The idea of global commons have been reconfirmed in the new Antarctica Treaty which prohibits all mining exploration and development for fifty years and protects wildlife as well as regulates waste disposal and marine pollution. The idea of global commons has great significance in at least two respects. It elevates environmental concern to a higher plane. While saving the planet is a noble objective it is difficult to particularise it, but protection of global commons appeals so vividly and appears so justified. Secondly, it provides an opening for raising resources for the environment revolution without actually seeking assessments or voluntary contributions. (These are the two ways prevalent in the UN system for raising resources. Even for raising resources from the Capital market, some form of assessment in terms of capital contribution is needed.)

ATMOSPHERE AS GLOBAL COMMONS: Like high seas and Antarctica, the atmosphere and the space should also be treated as global commons. Pollution of the atmosphere affect all people. The World Bank estimates that interior air pollution for burning wood, charcoal or dung endangers the health of 400 to 700 million people. Dust and soot in city air causes 300,000 to

700,000 premature deaths. Emission of sulphur and lead is polluting the atmosphere and such emission is due to industrialisation and use of motorised vehicles. The greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide, methane, CFCs and nitrous oxide do not simply pollute the atmosphere but may also lead to global warming. CFCs in particular cause ozone depletion which has serious consequences for human health, and for the productivity of marine and terrestrial systems.

The protection of the atmosphere is of utmost importance to humankind. Pollution of the atmosphere could entail international taxation. For example, carbon emission could be taxed and the resources mobilised thereby could be invested for the environment revolution. Such taxation in addition to mobilising resources would be a deterrent for pollution of the global commons. There will be equity in such a system of taxation. Seventy-two per cent of carbon emission now is caused by developed countries, so they will pay the major share of taxes for carbon pollution. On the other hand there will also be burden sharing in such a system of resource mobilisation. Developing countries will pay for their share of carbon emission i.e. 28 per cent.

Third World's Access to Technology and Resources  
The advantage that need be assured to the developing

countries are essentially two. First, they must have easy access to pollution-control and environment-friendly technologies. This can be provided only by public intervention at international level. Second, they must be provided additional concessional resources for investment in the environment revolution. International taxation related to global commons is one certain measure for adding to the availability of concessional resources.

### Conclusion

The preparatory work for the UNCED has made its most valuable contribution by focusing attention on the contours of a new global economic and ecological order. Whatever may be the immediate outcome in Rio, the UNCED is indeed a milestone in the evolution of a global civil society. Such a civil society will mean an interdependent world order concerned more with economic welfare of people living in harmony with the environment, rather than a world order obsessed with territorial security. Although in the UN headquarters as well as in Washington, peace-keeping and territorial security still seem to be receiving priority attention; the urgent issue of economic and ecological security has been brought to the forefront by preparations for the UNCED. The principles of Rio Declaration are indeed lofty and that is a good beginning. Without lofty idealism nothing great can be achieved. Agenda 21 has started a comprehensive dialogue on the global issue of economic and ecological security. The Earth Summit will surely advance this dialogue even if it fails to adopt an effective action plan.

For Bangladesh which is one of the most ecologically vulnerable countries in the world, the Rio Conference is of very special significance indeed.

## 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.

### Rickshaws: positive sides

Sir, They say the rickshaws of Dhaka transport more people than the London underground. As well the folk art painted with startling colours on the backs, seats and sides of the cycle rickshaws reflects a certain tradition of the common people. Pop art on the streets of Dhaka.

In response to the article you wrote, Mr Nurunnabi, entitled "Rickshaw Anarchy on City Roads," printed in The Daily Star dated 22 May — next time you drive your car on Dhaka's streets, look to the right and to the left and pay number being towed through the busy Shadarghat area the other evening, seven more

than were in the Pajero we were driving.

The "paralyse" and "slow paced... Pandemonium" you refer to, is frequently caused not by the cycle rickshaws which are easily manoeuvred but by the drivers of trucks and buses with their contrasting size and the chauffeurs of the wealthy who speed their saloons and break the traffic rules by virtue of their self-importance. Inept policemen also contributed to the chaos with their lack of attention to congestion matters and above this confusion — clouds of toxic air pollutes the lungs of Dhaka's citizens from what? — from the motorized transport.

— Cycle rickshaws are environmentally sound. Those of us who travel frequently and

breathe the foul air of the "megacities," which you refer to them as, are pleased that for the most part, Dhaka's air quality is still far better (and safer) than that of Delhi, for instance, whose residents suffer frequent respiratory problems because of the foul air. The two cycle engines which run the baby taxis, contribute forty per cent of the air pollution in that city.

— Cycle rickshaws offer probably more than 650,000 men employment on whose wages many others depend.

— Cycle rickshaws, because of their size, can ply the narrow lanes and streets apart from larger avenues.

— Cycle rickshaws serve Dhaka's lower and middle class citizens with cheap transport. Why not Dhaka lead the way? Take the initiative and move ahead of other cities? Or do you want to copy the same quagmire we now find in polluted places, such as Bangkok where people frequently walk with scarves held over their noses. Call attention to the aspects of your city's rickshaw transport and capitalize on an

issue you, as citizens, can deal with. Elevate the status of the cycle rickshaw and give a little respect to the pullers so they can take pride in obeying traffic laws (which should be enforced) and use lanes designated only for the use of cycle rickshaws.

It is my suggestion to make use of a reliable resource and recognize the convenience which rickshaws offer — door to door public transport.

Marilyn Dodge  
Dhaka

### Tax rules and rates

Sir, Thanks to Mr Ziauddin Ahmed, for his letter under the caption "Income Tax" The Daily Star, May 30. I have gone through the letter with intense interest for it dwells on a subject of public importance and great significance. The letter writer has taken pains to express himself clearly and his observations are worth careful consideration. I am tempted to add something.

Not only that the existing Tax Rules are cumbersome,

but very much distressing for the tax payers. The rules and rates require simplification so that it is well understood by the commonman and evaders are also easily detected and brought to book.

In view of the unintelligible rules, the tax payers suffer the most and the Tax office and Tax lawyers take unbecomingly advantage of it. We being laymen know little of fiscal matters, but this is very much clear to me that "my pocket is the best barometer to measure the country's economy". And it is in the fitness of things that rules and rates of taxes need be simplified for the benefit of all.

M Ibne Glas  
Massey, Dhaka

### MRP

Sir, It is not understandable to us as to why certain Bangladeshi manufacturing companies write MRP on their products when the sellers do not sell those at that at all? For instance, every month I need to purchase quite a good number of dry cell batteries for my

electronic gadgets. Earlier I used to purchase foreign made batteries especially the medium size ones because country-made medium size batteries are not readily available. Of course for the last few months, I have been purchasing a local brand. The MRP printed on the label is Tk 6.05 per cell but the shopkeepers are selling these batteries at Tk 11 or 12 per piece — double of the MRP.

Not only batteries but many other products are being sold at prices much higher than their MRPs. When someone wishes to get the matter clarified from the shop-keepers, they would reply that the company has increased the price.

I think, to popularize the domestic products among the consumers, the authorities have to ensure selling of all products at just retail prices. Relevant law should be strictly enforced in this regard.

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