

Unwanted Labour

Kuala Lumpur appears to be acting correctly in dealing with the influx of tens of thousands of illegal immigrants, mostly from Asian countries, including Bangladesh, who have entered Malaysia in search of jobs in its booming economy. In effect, many of them may be already employed in the country's rubber estates and manufacturing industries, using false identity cards which are allegedly distributed by networks in Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore. It is not, therefore, surprising that many of these illegals live in substandard conditions, earning pathetically low wages. That many of them end up by supplementing their income from criminal activities, ranging from armed robberies to drug trafficking, only adds to the concern of the authorities.

While tightening the immigration control, the Malaysian government has set up a system of registration of these unwanted immigrants. According to the latest report, more than 145,000 such illegals have registered since the procedure was introduced in November. It is not clear from press reports as to the total number of people who had applied for registration and whether or not those who have complied with the procedure would be now entitled for regular jobs.

What is of immediate concern to all, the deadline for registration falls on Tuesday when unregistered illegal workers would be facing deportation from Malaysia. Meanwhile, the country's Foreign Minister Abdullah Ahmed Badawi will be meeting more than 20 heads of foreign missions to explain the situation in the light of the impending deportation of the unwanted labour. It will be a good gesture on the part of Malaysia if the deadline for deportation is extended, even by a month, to enable the countries to sort out the mess their nationals, the illegal workers, find themselves in.

The last report we had published on this subject in this paper suggested that there were about 15,000 illegal Bangladeshi workers now living in Malaysia. We do not know if the number is still the same. Let us hope that a sizable proportion among them have qualified for registration.

It is important for the Government of Bangladesh to take this as a test case for reviewing the whole situation about the export of our manpower to such labour-scarce countries like Malaysia, Singapore and Japan, not to mention the Gulf region. Since it is the private sector in these countries which is the biggest employer in manufacturing and construction industries, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed among governments does not necessarily produce jobs for our workers. This means we should establish a dialogue with the private sector. Again, much can be done to improve on the selection procedure of workers looking for opportunities in these countries. Here, the role of private employment agencies in Dhaka, not to mention of their associates at the other end, must be defined and constantly supervised. It is also important that once selected for possible jobs in the countries in Asia or in the Gulf, the prospective candidates should undergo orientation courses in different skills as well as language lessons, with a view to raising their productivity and usefulness in their new work environment. Since these workers would be remitting part of their earning to Bangladesh in foreign exchange, the authorities should certainly invest in the setting up of the proposed orientation courses. We must know that what is at stake is not just employment for our job-seekers but the image of the country.

We Salute Madhusudan

It is a most gratifying decision on the part of Radio Bangladesh that they will today broadcast live the audience participation programme from Jessore BD Hall to be held in connection with the death anniversary of Michael Madhusudan Dutta. The same would be relayed by all stations of the radio.

It would be wrong to assume that Michael is a popular writer although he is one of the most important of our writers. And that should be all the more reason why special efforts should be made to reach his work to the people. Besides, our society would profit immensely from the experiences and exertions of this great poet and dramatist — did he not spur his infatuation for everything English and turn to mother Bengal as a matter of returning to his own nature and a life of fulfilment as a poet? But his physical as well as mental sojourn into the European clime as also its soul was not jettisoned outright. Post-renaissance maturation of Europe into an idea of a man-centred universal becoming rather than the god-centred — was with what he changed the temper of the provincial and petty god-and-goddess ridden Bengali literature and indeed of the whole of the Bengali psyche.

While it has been long appreciated that his epic 'Meghnad Bawdh Kavya' should be compulsory reading for all educated Bengali as also all educated people of the subcontinental culture — his plays, although never failing to get a goodly audience, have never been prized for what they indeed were — literal gems of literature and unrivalled tomes of protest against social injustice and degeneration.

Madhusudan Dutta was the brightest at the same time the most tragic of the dazzling array of talents and geniuses known, at most times pejoratively, as Young Bengal — the disciples of the legendary De Rozee. He wrought a real revolution not only of the Bengali mind but also of the Bengali language and literature, specially as expressed in metered poetry. We salute this unhappy and unsatisfied great son of Sagardari, Jessore. And we again thank the radio.

EVERY day since the overthrow of Mohammed Najibullah's communist regime in Afghanistan, as many as 400 refugee families have returned from Pakistan.

But repatriation must not proceed too quickly, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees who echoes the concern of many of those refugees, because conditions inside Afghanistan are still far from safe.

Pierre Gueretut, the Deputy Chief of the UNHCR mission in Pakistan, said the air war for rural Afghanistan is now over. "There is no longer the fear of bombing or scud missiles," he said.

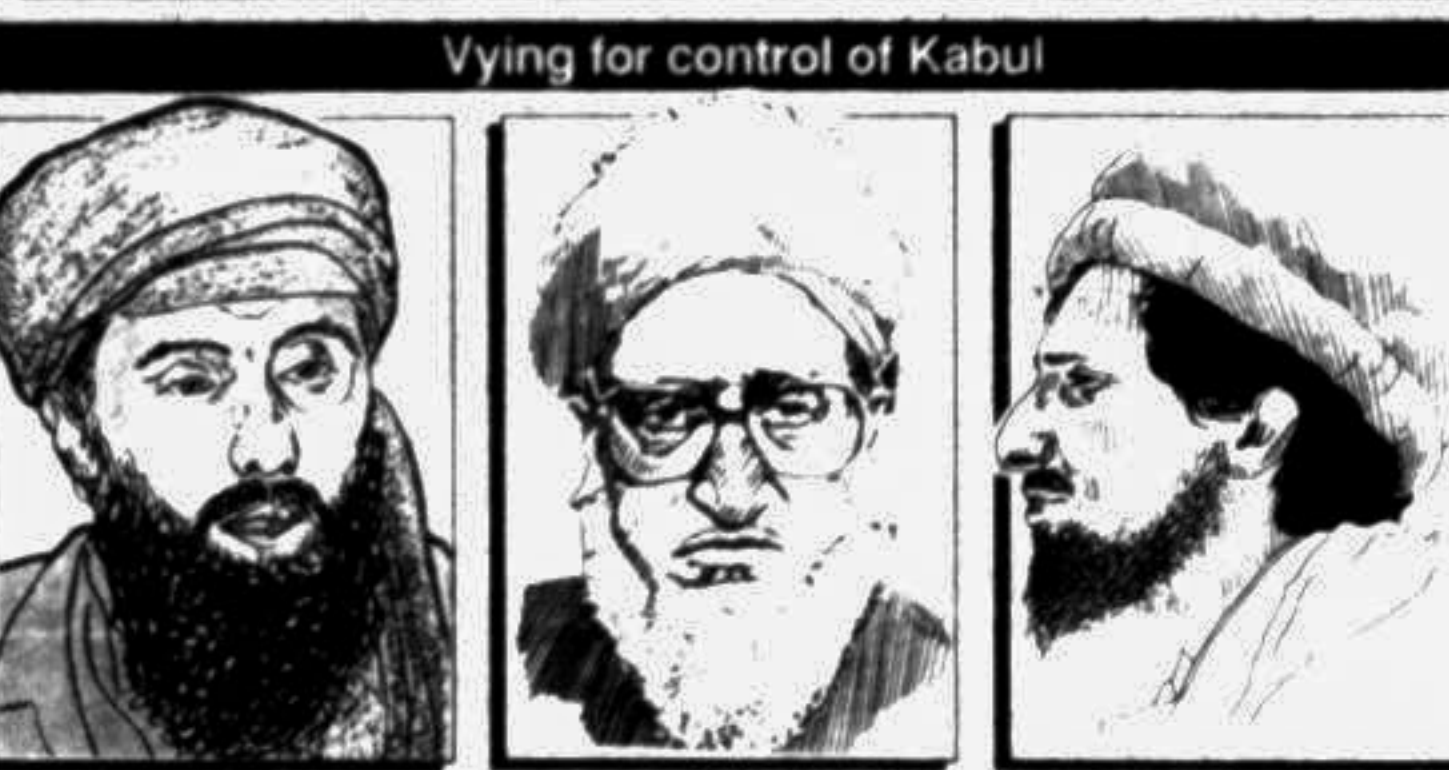
However, he cautioned that the countryside has been devastated by the 13-year war fought by guerrillas against the Soviet-backed regime. It will take many years to remove the countless mines from the fields and to reconstruct the irrigation and agricultural infrastructure needed to feed the Afghan people.

"Repatriation is a process," Gueretut said. "So far many refugees are only going back to set up their houses and check on their fields so that the rest of the family can back later."

Pakistan and Iran have each welcomed three million Afghans since the war began. In Pakistan, the 345 camps have evolved into refugee villages. Food rations have been provided by the UNHCR and international non-governmental organisations have set up health and education facilities in the camps.

Most of the refugees in Pakistan are ethnically Pathan. The prominent resistance leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar has been based in Peshawar since 1974. His Hizb-i-Islami party has refused to join the interim government on charges that it is not representative of the majority Pathan population, and its Defence Minister Ahmed Shah Massoud, who is a Tajik, has joined forces with the formerly communist, and un-Islamic,

Afghanistan was one of the last Cold War tragedies, where superpower rivalry led to the destruction of a once peaceful Asian country. After 13 years of bitter civil war, the pro-Moscow regime of President Mohammed Najibullah was toppled in early May by US-supported Mujahideens. But tribal and ethnic divisions continue to plague the guerrillas. In a country ravaged civil strife, new fighting can only mean further devastation. In two special reports, Gemini News Service analyses the Afghan situation. The second instalment will be published tomorrow.



Gulbuddin Hekmatyar: fundamentalist; Sibghatullah Mojaddidi: figurehead; Ahmed Shah Massoud: ferocious fighter

Since the beginning of Afghanistan's civil war 13 years ago, more than six million people have fled across the border to Pakistan and Iran. Now, with the promise of peace in their country, many of these refugees are making their way back home. But they will face daunting problems in rebuilding their lives from the ravages of war.

The mood inside one camp near Peshawar is one of despair. One woman wept at the thought of going home. "We have nothing to feed our children," she said.

"This war has taken our homes and the men in our families," added another refugee woman. "We are going to need as much assistance as possible. Pakistan must help us in whatever way it can."

But there are signs that Pakistan's ready hospitality to these refugees may be coming to an end. Residents of the congested city of Peshawar blame the refugees for taking land, trees and cattle, as well as monopolizing cheap labour jobs.

Pakistan has shared its limited

Ayesha Khan writes from Peshawar

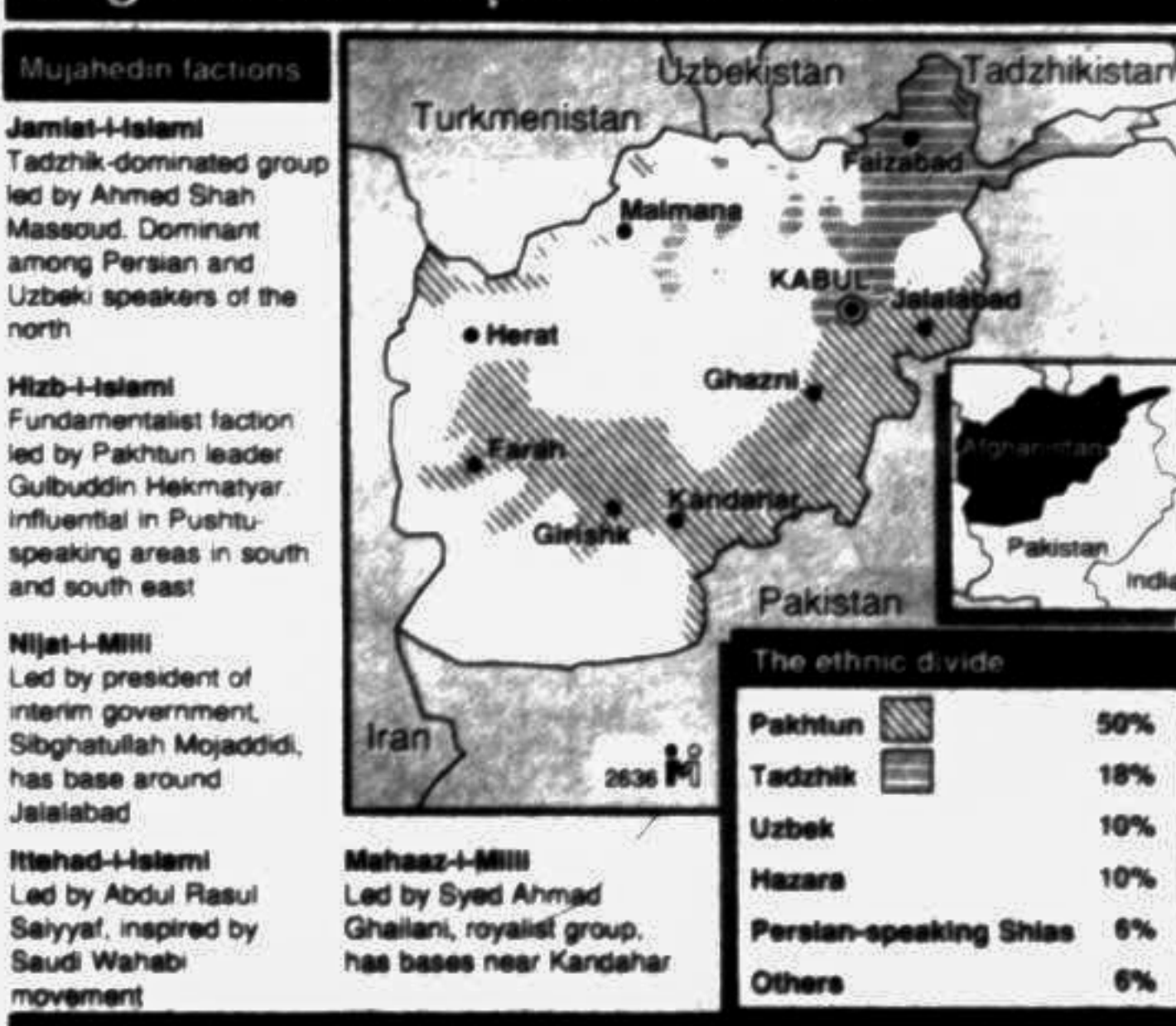
resources, including hospitals and schools, with the refugees, but villagers complain that many refugees camps — with their drinking wells and basic health facilities provided by aid groups — are better equipped than ordinary villages in the region.

The government has offered to provide free transport for the refugees to main cities inside Afghanistan. Gulzar Khan, until recently the Chief Commissioner for Afghan Refugees, says: "We are all very optimistic that peace will prevail in Afghanistan and the refugees will return with safety and honour to apply themselves fully to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. We have no

fears and no worries here." The optimism may be premature. Hekmatyar's forces have already fought battles with those of Massoud for control of Kabul. Although hectic negotiating by former Mujahideen leaders is taking place, there is no guarantee that a peace agreement will be reached in the near future. Unless all of Afghanistan's eight main ethnic groups are satisfied with their share of power, the threat of civil war exists.

Ahmed, a young man who came to Pakistan more than 10 years ago, is firm about his conditions for returning home. "Right now the situation in

Afghanistan: peace now?



Afghanistan is bad," he says. "We will be happy to go home when there is an Islamic government in place and the forces of the Gham Jam militia in Kabul have been removed."

Ahmed is a follower of Hekmatyar. This political affiliation, combined with knowing that a devastated Afghanistan will be unlivable, is preventing many Afghan refugees from returning home.

Although the rate of return has increased, it is unlikely to grow dramatically until security has been restored within Afghanistan.

If refugees continue to return at their current rate, it will still take more than four years for all three million refugees in Pakistan to be repatriated. The government is

unprepared for the possible economic and political burdens this may involve.

If the threat of civil war remains in Afghanistan, and the rate of refugee repatriation decreases, senior official Gulzar Khan says that the Pakistan government has no contingency plans.

Meanwhile, international aid to the refugees is dwindling. Funding by UN member countries to feed the Afghans shrank after the Geneva Accords of 1988 paved the way for a political solution to the Afghan conflict. It was expected that the refugees would return soon after the accords were signed. As a result, rations for tea and sugar were stopped.

Today, international funds are needed more than ever, according to UNHCR's Pierre Gueretut. The repatriation project will cost more than one billion dollars. Even if there are enough funds available for this, a much larger commitment is required for the complementary project of Afghanistan's internal reconstruction.

Long-term planning will be needed to clear the rural areas of mines and rebuild irrigation canals. There are a minimum of health facilities available to the Afghan people and so a great need for medical personnel and equipment to be sent. International aid organisation are hesitant to launch expensive projects inside Afghanistan until the threat of further fighting is over.

Future planning, for both aid donors and the refugees, is not possible at this stage. Those refugees returning do so with trepidation. Those remaining in Pakistan do so aware that their welcome and sources of economic support may be running out.

AYESHA KHAN is a freelance journalist based in Islamabad, where she writes on social issues.

Poverty Prevents Human Rights Realisation

by Delwar Zahid

HUMAN rights activities are not new in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR) was founded in 1977 as an activist organisation especially to promote the administration of justice, the rule of law and to secure legal guarantees for basic human rights in Bangladesh. Its programme was initiated to educate the members of the society, to spread legal literacy education and knowledge, to offer legal aid and advice to the poor, to investigate issues relating to human rights violations etc.

BSEHR sometimes studied law covering rights of those likely to be subjected to torture. Labourers, women, children and rural poor families and slum dwellers are facing different types of oppression,

most of which are illegal within the existing legal framework of the land. Because of their ignorance, financial inability and lack of social awareness and support they cannot protect themselves.

Many organisations in Bangladesh are working in the field of human rights, for giving legal support to the victims. But no organisation in particular is looking at poverty as the main cause of inequality and obstacle in realisation of their rights and freedom.

Concentration of poverty in the rural areas may be removed gradually through framing of self reliance projects and using local resources. Rural people are most often illiterate and have little professional training. The overall economic condition of an increasing number of the land-

less and women, in rich and poor countries alike, deteriorated dramatically giving rise to a phenomenon that has been called the feminization of poverty.

An important study in the field of human rights and development is being carried out by the Bangladesh Foundation of Human Rights (BFHR), Comilla. The experiment has far reaching implications for the human rights and development strategies to be designed for Comilla. The experiment centres round the debate on whether class-independent group formations, involving the landless and distressed women, or most of the inhabitants of the villages, are suitable as the institution for human rights and development

in Bangladesh. One school holds that in class-independent societies, the rich will exploit the facilities to frustrate the systems originally designed for the poor.

Rural poor has been identified on the basis of income. BFHR is aware of the fact that the rural poor do not keep records of their incomes and they are not aware about their rights and privileges.

For the prevention of discrimination in the society the NGOs working in the field of human rights should emphasize the need for effective co-ordination of their work on realisation of grassroots participation in human rights activities. The raising of poverty level is yet an unanswered question in

our country. Without economic emancipation, establishment of human rights will remain a dream. After independence of Bangladesh, economic well-being has been achieved for many, but poverty remains unresolved. Democratic politics of liberty, equality and fraternity can well imply mass movement for human rights. Inequality of opportunities and maldistribution of facilities are the popular grievances for that struggle towards emancipation.

Equality in the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms is the vital issue of the world. The United Nations charter promotes and encourages respect for human rights, on equality of rights and prevention of discrimination. Article-1 of the charter reads: "All human beings are born

free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood" while Article-2 states: "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedom set forth in this declaration without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property birth or other status."

To establish human rights at the grassroots, our first duty is to do our best to solve the problem by addressing the causes of poverty of the teeming masses.

PRINCIPAL DELWAR ZAHID is a Human Rights activist.

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.

Bangladeshis in UK

Sir, I was just going through the article — "Bangladeshis in Britain — profile of a professional family," by Lindsay Mackie, contributor to 'The Guardian', London, dated: June 9, 1992. I am just surprised to note about the wrong picture being flashed about the Bangladeshi community in Britain. The Bangladeshi children have the lowest rate of successfully passing the school, below 1%, while the Indian rate is 19% and British rate of passing is 16%. The Bangladeshi girls are not at all bright to be noteworthy, they are constantly failing as I myself used to teach school children in London. The schools in and around London which enroll Bangladeshi children are below usual British standard and the standard of knowledge these community children receive is not much better than the rural primary schools in Bangladesh. Most of the Bangladeshi neither speak proper Bengali, nor English. I worked as an interpreter for a Local Council and found some Bangladeshi willfully staying away from work and receiving unemployment benefits, which in Islam is 'Haram' for a person who can work. The restaurant business is the main source of income for the said community there.

But, it is noteworthy that some families are doing very well, specially in Scotland and outside London areas. They send their children to school

and many of them are highly qualified and well settled, but that is not the whole scenario. It is an exception which cannot be taken as a part of the whole community to be represented.

Anwar Hussain Khilgaon, Dhaka.

Air-conditioners, fridges and cars

Sir, Reduction in the rates on luxury goods like cars, air-conditioners and refrigerators will hamper poverty alleviation process and improvement of environmental degradation. Our richer section of people will take advantage of it and import more and more of these unnecessary, unhealthy luxury items in our poor country without knowing the bad effects of these items. If we reduce the tax, then how do we tell the rich to cut down on cars, freezers and air-conditioners to save this earth. Government of Bangladesh had signed a convention at Earth Summit at Rio-de-Janeiro recently to protect ozone layer and contain green-house effect i.e. warming up of atmosphere.

Richer people must not enjoy comfort at the cost of poorer section and environment. None of these items, their spare parts or feeded gas are manufactured in Bangladesh. We have to import these by spending hard earned foreign exchange. Petrol and

diesel exhaust from cars will add green house gases for warming of atmosphere. F-22 for air-conditioners and F-12 for fridges are CFC gases which harm the ozone layer. Again use of air-conditioners have some bad effect on the health of occupiers because same air is re-circulated inside air-conditioned room without much oxygen. Due to over-population and de-forestation in Bangladesh, emission of carbon dioxide gas is more in the atmosphere. So more and more carbon dioxide gas is re-circulated inside the air-conditioned room than in a normal ventilated room. Research in Germany says air-conditioning can be a home for bacteria.

Toxins from air-conditioning are blamed for headaches, cough, allergies and eczemas. Air-conditioning increases susceptibility to colds because of chill factor. However, the real culprit may be the low relative humidity of refrigerated air. In a Canadian study, schools with high humidity reported 40 per cent fewer cold-related absences than schools with low relative humidity did. Researchers say that good ventilation and vigilant personal hygiene are the most important factors in preventing people from catching and spreading colds.

Our well-to-do people are enjoying air-conditioners without knowing the bad side of it as pointed out above. To save the country and environment, import of these items be discouraged at least by not reducing the tax or even tax on these items may be increased to discourage import.

M Alauddin Refrigeration Engineer and member BSCE West Nakhal Para, Dhaka.

Dragons Gain New Muscle

The enormous economic clout of Asia's newly industrialised countries could give them formidable political power, analysts say. Ramon Isberto of IPS reports from Manila

AS the world becomes multi-polar, Asia's economic dragons are emerging as potent new factors in the security of the Asia-Pacific region.

The prosperity of countries like South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan is giving them political influence in the region, says a new study by the Centre for Research and Communication (CRC), a conservative Manila-based think tank.

It also allows them to spend generously on defence which again enhances their political clout, the study said.

The growth importance of the newly industrialised countries (NICs) is diminishing US political influence in the region, says Julius Caesar Parrenas, author of the study, 'Restructuring for Stability'.

Along with a gradual US military withdrawal from the region, the Soviet Union's vanishing act and Japan's increasing assertiveness, this trend is contributing heavily to the rise of a multi-polar balance of power in the region.

Such a scenario would be even more interesting if the two Koreas are reunited this decade. "Korean reunification must be seen as a development that could lead to a major change in the face of the western Pacific," Parrenas says.

This analysis is premised on the view that in the post-Cold War world, military clout is declining in importance while economic power is rising.

"Military strength remains important," says Alan Ortiz, deputy director general of the Philippines' National Security Council. "It will always be there. But in the new world si-

tuation, economic power is the dynamic element."

By that measure, Asia's NICs have enormous potential clout. The four so-called dragons account for one-third of Asia-Pacific exports and their combined gross national product amounted to US\$311 billion in 1988.

The NICs are awash with surplus cash. Taiwan has foreign exchange reserves worth US\$75 billion. Singapore has US\$20 billion while South Korea has US\$13 billion. From being net recipients of foreign aid after the Pacific War, these countries have become sources of aid and investments for the less developed countries of the region.

Total Taiwanese direct investments abroad is estimated to be worth about US\$5 billion, while South Korea and Singapore have about US\$2 billion each.

"More directly related to the Asia-Pacific balance of power is the growing military capabilities of the NICs," Parrenas said.

The defence budgets of South Korea and Taiwan (both over US\$7 billion dollars in the last three years) are the second and third largest in the Western Pacific after Japan. In dollar terms, their budgets exceeded that of China and Australia.

These two countries have thus become conventional military powers, whose armed forces are among the best-equipped in the region. Tiny Singapore's military is the best-trained and best-armed in South-east Asia.

The prospect of a unified Korea no longer seems impossible after Germany's experi-

ence and North Korea's worsening economic difficulties. Analysts foresee this happening if communist control in Pyongyang is unified.

A unified Korea would be an important political, economic and military power in North-east Asia, adding one more power to the four already shaping the region's future — China, Japan, the United States and Russia," Parrenas says.

A unified Korea today would have a population of nearly 70 million, a combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of around US\$200 billion. This would bring together the technological and financial resources of the South with the disciplined, low-cost labour force and mineral resources of the North.

Its armed forces would have 1.7 million men, with about 10 million reservists, versus Japan's 250,000-strong armed forces with about 48,000 reservists.

A combined Korean air force would have 1,100 combat aircraft, twice as many as Japan's. With 5,000 tanks and 3,700 other armoured vehicles, a unified Korean army would have an armoured force five times larger than Japan's.

Parrenas expects Japan's economic role in Korea to grow as Japanese capital flows in to develop the North. But friction could rise as the two countries become rivals in the region.

The end of the North-South conflict would also lead most likely to the withdrawal of US forces in Korea, which could translate into a major reduction of the US military role in the region, Parrenas says.