

A Sterile Summit

It is hard to pick up a single specific issue on which an agreement at the Summit of the seven most powerful industrialised nations, just over in Munich, would make much difference to the world. President George Bush is probably right in describing the three-day meeting as a "frank exchange of views" which has been interpreted to mean that there was no agreement on any of the unresolved problems facing either the G-7 or the world at large.

Of course, the seven leaders reached a measure of unanimity on a few issues. They agreed on the need for economic growth, not so much of the world at large as of their own nations. They were unanimous on the opening of a land corridor to provide relief to Yugoslavia. And they agreed on steps to upgrade the safety of Soviet-designed nuclear power plants. On the last-mentioned issue, perhaps a more significant move was to extend the deadline for the signing of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) until 1995, not so much for the sake of India which has been under pressure — and rightly so — to accept it as to enable a number of republics of the former Soviet Union, which have these deadly weapons in their possession, to make up their mind about NPT.

Since the Summit was primarily concerned with economic matters, a firm decision on concluding world trade talks within a specific deadline would have gone a long way in turning this unproductive conference into one of some positive achievements. Unfortunately, on this issue, all that the Munich meeting could do was to express the hope that an agreement might be reached before the end of the year.

There were several reasons why the seven leaders were unable to go beyond generalities. For one thing, virtually all the participants are caught in serious domestic problems, some affecting their popularity on their home front. They range from the presidential election in the United States to differences even within the ruling Conservative Party in Britain over the pattern of European integration, symbolised by the Maastricht treaty. Meanwhile, Japan which has much to gain from maintaining an open trading system is unable to overcome its domestic obstacles to imports. Add to such domestic problems the differences among the members of the club over aid to Russia and other Republics of the former Soviet Union.

Whatever might have been the original purpose of holding the first summit in the early seventies, the Munich conference has done little to give it a new lease of life or, for that matter, a measure of credibility in the eyes of the world. No one would deny the need for government leaders of the seven most powerful nations to hold annual consultations, or even to bring in Russia as the eighth member. But it is time such a summit started looking at the world as a whole, especially at the critical relationship between the industrialised north and the developing south, offering proposals as to how this relationship could be turned into a genuine partnership. In some of the earlier recent summits, there was some hope that Japan would try to give this annual meeting a new direction by speaking up for the developing world, in the context of global changes. Judging by available press reports, Japan did not follow this course in Munich. In some ways, therefore, the so-called greatest political show of the year turned out to be more inward-looking than the last one, no better than a sterile summit, hardly relevant to the rest of the world.

Seriously Trying the Co-op

On Saturday Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia told a congregation of one lakh co-operators of the immense possibilities that the nation could realise through co-operation. The surest way of ensuring the masses their daily portion of *dal-bhat* lay in co-operation, she said. It is hard to agree more with the PM in this — as far as the question is one of theoretical possibility. That a practical realisation of the same is fraught with many formidable impediments and challenges was proved in a tell-tale fashion by the PM's pronouncement of exemption from paying back agricultural loans up to Tk 5,000 by co-operator-farmers. Evidently, co-operation has failed to come to the help of these farmers or they could pay their loans without denting the national exchequer.

There is no question that co-operation succeeds as an instrument of elevating the economic level of all in the society. Denmark is a very good example of that. In the subcontinent however the experience has been less satisfying. Although there have been pockets where the enterprising small man whether in agriculture or in small cottage-level engineering or crafts undertaking has done wonders — as in the Punjab or Maharashtra, of India. This part of the sub-continent, in spite of being one of the earlier areas to take up co-operation as an article of faith with the government, could never make of it something that eminently helps the economy of the society on a large scale or raises particular target groups out of economic morass or proves beneficial to the government's handling of the socio-economic imbalances.

Traditionally, co-operatives had a way of being reduced to dens of corruption and little besides — most were so many rackets organised by people who already had their fingers in the social pie. This was in spite of the great efforts early in the century by Rabindranath to spread co-operative enterprises among farmers. His co-operative financing bank for farmers at Patisar ended with eating up his Nobel Prize money. Almost half a century later Akhter Hamid Khan, choosing Comilla as his base, sought to reverse the counterproductive co-operative degeneration and in a great sweep, called the 'Comilla Model', brought a vast magnitude of the small people to co-operate out of the clutch of poverty and backwardness. The Prime Minister on Saturday made a mention of that but we do not know if his work progressed to any meaningfully rewarding socio-economic mechanism after he had left it.

Co-operatives do indeed provide a way for economic uplift on the national level through broad-based ownership of means of production and participatory enterprise — a way that hasn't gone on famously as a favourite with our economists. Successive governments too, are, in spite of their unflinching patronisation, haven't ever taken this up as a serious prop for economic recovery. The PM has now spoken emphatically on seriously trying the co-operatives. The society will keep a tab on what comes of this.

THE problem with agriculture and rural development is that practically everybody feels he is an expert on the subject. The amateurs have a real field day and the talkative ones among them would go on lecturing on the issues and problems of Gram Bangla for hours, if necessary.

My own conclusion is that I know so little about my own country and the people. The depth of the agrarian problem is practically bottomless; the struggle for existence by the landless is truly amazing. Yet the naive confidence of the amateurs knows no bounds. Their lengthy comments and elaborate discourse sound utterly incredible. Yet there are no respites.

Perhaps fools rush in where angels fear to tread; we are lost in the verbal wilderness on the non-expert do-gooders. Being aware of the immensity of the problems, the escapist professionals retreat to the background through employment abroad; while the do-gooders march in, armed with innocence and hardly anything else.

Some of the remarks of innocent do-gooders are worth noting: "So much land along roads, canals and railway tracks remain unused; why can't the nearby villagers plant fruit trees; why not make the derelict ponds productive with fish culture and also plant trees around them?" Then a pause and a follow-up remark: "we have so little land, yet so much is wasted and instead of

fish, frogs abound the derelict ponds."

However, it is not a bad idea to let the frogs thrive on the ponds. We may export frog legs to France and earn foreign exchange; while, instead of fruit trees, let us widen the roads so that innocent do-gooders from Dhaka can proceed to the villages in comfort. After all they mean well for the unfortunate rural Bengal.

Comfort Strategy

The electricity strategy of rural development is one of the fabulous ideas that I have come across so far. "You see, it is very simple," said one of its proponents, "if electricity is made available then the educated elite can live comfortably in his own village, enjoy the benefit of running water and the hot months of Chaitra-Baishakh will be made tolerable by the air-conditioners while the refrigerator will store the foods, bought fresh from Dhaka." The do-gooders will then turn to the village in large numbers and undertake rural development without any loss of urban comforts.

The "best" or rural development strategies originate at the dining tables of Gulshan and Dhanmandi. With a plateful of vegetables, potato and meat but very little rice, I have heard the lords of poverty say, "the food problem can be solved if the villagers change their food habits. They eat too much rice instead of more potato and vegetables; look at my plate — hardly any rice". The meat was practically hid-

den under the leafy vegetables, spinach perhaps — good for health.

The do-gooders have one thing in common: their knowledge of the rural economy is almost nil. The roadside plantations cannot be developed by villagers since there are no individual rights to the use of such land. Why Karam Ali should invest his time and resources until and unless he is assured of the returns. On the other hand, the government lands adjacent to railway stations are enjoyed by the railway employees and that is the way the station masters survive

but remain profoundly skeptical of their intentions since they have been exploited so much by so many and for so long that they trust no one unless of the same kind. In this connection, the frustration of an NGO worker is so illustrative of the village mind: After a hard day's work to initiate literacy programme in a remote village, one of the landless day labourers asked the NGO workers if they had come for votes.

Different Language

Even the urban language of the educated is so different



with the meagre salary. The derelict ponds are not reexcavated for fish culture because there are hundreds of co-sharers of those water bodies and everybody's business has turned into nobody's affair. Rural electrification cannot be justified only for the comforts of the well-to-do. It must energize irrigation pumps, rice mills and ordinary village homes as well.

If the urban elite visit the village more often, it will also do no good. The gap between him and the landless of the same village is enormous, so much so that they practically belong to different planets. On the other hand, the villagers will be polite to the do-good-

ers but remain profoundly skeptical of their intentions since they have been exploited so much by so many and for so long that they trust no one unless of the same kind. In this connection, the frustration of an NGO worker is so illustrative of the village mind: After a hard day's work to initiate literacy programme in a remote village, one of the landless day labourers asked the NGO workers if they had come for votes.

vasectomy campaign on condition that he alone would speak and the govt. people must remain quiet at the meeting of the villagers he called for the purpose. There, his explanation of what is vasectomy clearly reached the villagers because of the particular language he spoke — plain, simple and within easy grasp of the people. He said, "the result of vasectomy is like a canal, which will not become moribund; it will still be active, full of water with the only difference that there will be no fish."

Gentlemen, we have had produced enough fish — no more is needed; now we will do better without the fish in the canal.

The message is so sharp and clear that it would fall to come out of the head of the scholars. Perhaps it is one of those which they do not teach at Harvard. It must come from within; from one of them who lives among them — eating more rice rather than vegetable and potato.

The do-gooders of rural development must try to learn first by living with the villagers, following their ways, speaking their language and appreciating their humour and sentiments. The do-gooder must identify himself thoroughly with the target group and then open the do-gooder's box of tricks to reach development to the village. He can play a tremendous role by providing the bridge between government and the village; for

example, lease in the roadside land for plantation, organise the co-sharers to reexcavate ponds for fish culture, secure quality seeds and fertilisers, promote irrigation, undertake literacy and family planning campaigns — the list of unfinished tasks is enormous. If there are 68,000 such dedicated do-gooders, one in each village of Bangladesh, thoroughly identified with the villagers, then the battle against poverty is practically won.

Feasible Alternative

Unfortunately this is not the case; nor is it likely to be in the near future. The only feasible alternative is land reform. Land is the ultimate source of all the gross domestic products and therefore must be reformed to create the conditions of owner-operated farming. Only then agricultural production can be maximised, giving rise to numerous agro-processing opportunities and the manifold increase of farm-level incomes which in turn would magnify the demand for consumer goods and services.

As a result, growth in manufacturing will eventually far exceed the size of the rural economy. Do-gooders of rural development will be extremely useful in promoting the cause of land reform. Let them remain with their urban life styles but serve the rural cause. They can be the prime movers of agrarian reform, for those who live and work in Gram Bangla.

Passing through the Looking Glass in Cyprus

Cedric Pulford writes from Nicosia

A threat by Canada to pull its troops out of the UN peacekeeping force in Cyprus has stirred international thinking about an old problem. Canadians have been the mainstay of the force for 28 years. The threat may be one reason UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali has renewed his efforts to achieve a Cyprus solution. A Gemini News Service correspondent has just visited the Turkish-occupied North.

Cyprus: divided island



they are just as they were in 1974 when, Pompeii-like, they were caught by the tide of war flowing over them.

The high emotions, of the disputants must communicate itself to visitors to Cyprus. Many, I heard, are afraid to cross to the Turkish side, although the same people would happily book a holiday in mainland Turkey.

I was in barely better shape as I made the Ledra Palace crossing, camera in hand and visions of a Turkish jail before my eyes.

What I found over the wall struck me more forcibly than

going from West to East Berlin in the communist heyday. It was like passing through a looking-glass. I seemed to be in another city; in Asia, not the Europe I had left minutes ago. The place even seemed to have twice as much dust.

Eventually I realised there were two reasons for this. Greek Cyprus has become wealthy — so rich, incidentally, that union with Greece is dead — on tourism and as a communications centre (it is a great and safe place for Middle East watchers); it shows in the size and glitter of the shops and buildings.

These developments have bypassed the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus,' a state recognised by no-one except Turkey and the target of numerous UN condemnations. This isolation declares itself in the rundown and aging look of Nicosia on the Turkish side.

The other reason for the Middle Eastern feel of Turkish Nicosia is that since 1974 thousands of people have been imported into the island from the mainland province of Anatolia to make up numbers. The Turks hold nearly 40 per cent of Cyprus land, although their people were originally

less than 20 per cent the population.

The sight of these Anatolian settlers — variously estimated at between 35,000 and 70,000 — shows just how intractable they Cyprus problem has become.

Now it will not be enough to square the accounts of the Greek and Turkish Cypriots, and according to reports the settlers are scarcely more popular with the local Turks than they are with the Greeks.

Outside Nicosia, North Cyprus seemed less dusty and not so very different from the Greek side, just less frenetic. In Kyrenia, British and German holidaymakers were to be seen enjoying the good though illegal air, presumably on the polite fiction of having landed first in Turkey and then transited to Cyprus.

The Turks appeared to be comfortably settled in. Eighteen years of a de facto government is long enough for many of its people to know no other.

But coming from the other side (and with the world agreeing with me), I could not rid myself of the idea that the Turks are making themselves comfortable in someone else's house.

Often they literally are. "When you get to Famagusta please go and look at my house," said a woman in Nicosia who had not seen her home since the invasion. It was just a pleasure, of course.

There was no time for me to find the house during my quick visit (back at the Ledra Palace crossing by 5 pm). If reunification comes that wo-

man and many thousands of her Greek compatriots will demand their houses back — just one aspect of the onerous to be unscrupulous.

The most lurid story I heard was that the Turks were using Christian churches as barns and stables. I could not confirm this, but somehow I doubt it. Certainly the Turks have removed the crosses that surmount Greek Orthodox churches, except in the two churches I saw that had become "icon museums."

Nowadays, however, I guess that neglect is a greater danger than desecration and vandalism to Greek churches because the Turks are too poor to maintain them.

The poverty of North Cyprus is never going to change while it is quarantined by the rest of the world. During the Gulf war Greek Cypriots remarked ruefully that if Cyprus produced oil instead of potatoes the problem would have been solved long ago.

Last year came the latest in a series of false dawns, when it looked as if there was a will to settle on both sides of the UN green line. Now, with instability in both the Middle East and the former Soviet Union, the United States has rediscovered reasons for keeping Turkey sweet, and the mood in Greek Nicosia is pessimistic.

The solution of the Cyprus problem may have to wait until Turkey applies to join the European Community. Greece is expected to exact reunification as the price of not opposing the application.

With Turkey's human rights record and economic underdevelopment — not to mention the impolite question of whether Turkey is European at all — it looks like a long wait.

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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.

"Plight of small investors"

Sir, This has reference to the letter published in your esteemed daily on the 22nd June under the caption "Plight of small investors." The less said about ICB, the better. It has done more harm than good, so much so that the small investors in large numbers have been forced to close their accounts with the organisation. The unethical practices followed by ICB over the years are too many to enumerate here. For instance, it purchased right shares of Progressive Plastics Industries when its market price was much below its par value and debited the accounts of the investors with interest of Tk 212/- on a purchase price of Tk 400/- apparently after a lapse of many years and without the knowledge of the investors. This is, to say the least, unpardonable. The or-

ganisation has been repeatedly asked by the investors to reverse those entries but they could care less.

Secondly, over the years they increased surreptitiously interest rate (charged on loan amount) from 12% initially to 13.5% in recent months. Since it is compounded quarterly, the annual interest actually comes to 15% to 16.5% all in the service of the small investors!

Thirdly, its management is very poor and it lacks potentiality so much that, for example, it has not so far been able to realise the interest and dividend due from M/s. Quasem Silk Mills Ltd for the last 4 years and credit the same to the accounts of the investors, although their accounts are religiously being debited with interest on balance loan amount. In that last sense, I must say, it is quite potent.

Fourthly, it charges interest on application money with effect from last date of receipt of

application for shares. But the organisation is known to pay the concerned companies the actual amount due on the successful applications after allotment of shares. And to hoodwink the investors it credits their accounts with refund money for unsuccessful applications after a period of 5 to 6 months. Al-Baraka did not accept this proposition of ICB and as such the bank did not allow any share on investors' accounts despite much cajoling.

Fifthly, dividends are posted long after these are received from the companies and who knows it does not make 'two pie' by way of interest on this and other accounts mentioned above.

Lastly, it has loaded the accounts with so many worthless shares giving little or no dividend for years that the investors are now in deep trouble. It has apparently done so on the plea that the investors have given them the power of attorney to buy or sell. The fact is only a few investors had done so in the confident belief that it can make no mistake in the matter of investment with its expertise and vast knowledge!

In view of the above situation I would urge upon the authorities in the Ministry of

Finance to give serious consideration for reduction in the rate of interest charged by ICB and to waive a portion of interest already charged, so as to give relief to the small investors and strengthen the share market.

One surfer

'Cover of darkness'

Sir, Barrister Moudud has criticized the agreement which enabled AL to join the Sangsad session as an agreement under the cover of darkness! We the common people heaved a sigh of relief when a disaster was averted.

We congratulate both AL and BNP for their statesmanship to work out such an agreement and recover from the stalemate. The country at this juncture needs such greatness and look forward to progress and recovery from the rot which was thrust on it by the autocratic rulers of the past. Collaborators of that shameful regime are taking advantage of the free and refreshing atmosphere that was unthinkable a couple of years back.

Both AL and BNP should also be on guard so that other anti-social forces cannot jeopardise the unity brought about the hard way. A news item appearing in your esteemed

columns earlier indicated that a minister of Dr Malik's cabinet in 1971, in the then East Pakistan, called the Prime Minister an 'idiot. We protest to such indecency and audacity. BNP in its magnanimity might had a momentary aberration to seek the assistance of an anti-liberation force, but in politics no mistake is irreparable. Neither the ones committed by AL in 1974-5.

What is important is that the whole country was engulfed in darkness by the actions of the cohorts of autocracy and it must come out of that by the association of the true friends of the people. The barrister's cover of darkness has started to lift, we hope.

M A Haq
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Appropriate laws for agroforestry

Sir, Recently I wrote in one of my letters 'to the editor' that Mr S Sikander Ahmed of Chittagong has been urging the government to frame and implement appropriate laws for the development of agroforestry in Bangladesh. Mr Ahmed in his recent personal letter to me said that he doesn't like to have more laws relating to forestry. He wrote

"my contention has always been that we have far too many of these laws, rules, regulations and procedures (LRRP). All of them are obsolete, impractical, ineffective and a few downright insulting and demeaning in as much as they infringe on one's basic human and constitutional rights. Plant a tree and risk being hanged!"

As a matter of fact, by putting the word "appropriate" in my letter under reference, I actually meant omission of unnecessary laws and introduction of practical laws for the development of agroforestry. Mr Ahmed cannot get rid of legal formalities in reaping the benefit out of his personal forest. Such laws are in force in every country of the world. What is needed — omission of unnecessary laws and red-tapism.

May I draw the kind attention of the Prime Minister and Forest and Environment Minister to the case of Mr S Sikander Ahmed who has utilized his personal wealth in the development of agroforestry. Doesn't he deserve his genuine personal return, if not a national recognition?

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