

# Strike as a Political Weapon—Option Abused

## A Climate for Investment

Among a few good ideas produced during the 11th session of the SAARC Council of Ministers, just over in Colombo, a tentative proposal to set up a mechanism for stepping up Japanese investment in this region is one that deserves particular attention.

The proposal comes at a time when market-oriented economies, with the private sector playing an increasingly pronounced role, have been gaining ground in most member nations of this regional grouping. However, we can already identify several obstacles which hinder progress in the desired direction. One such obstacle is, despite most liberal investment policies formulated by SAARC nations, foreign capital is yet to make an adequate response. In this respect, India may be better off than other members of the alliance, especially Bangladesh.

While it should not be the objective of the SAARC or, for that matter, of Bangladesh to rely exclusively on Japan for investment, there is no denying the fact that Tokyo has a great deal more to offer in this field than other industrialised nations. It also has a major gap to fill where South Asia is concerned. Figures recently released by the Export-Import Bank of Japan show that during the period from 1951 to 1990, the country's foreign direct investment in Asia totalled \$47,520 million, out of which the East Asia, China and ASEAN countries received as much as \$46,876 million, leaving the so-called "Rest of Asia" (including South Asia) a paltry \$644 million. It should be noted that the Japanese foreign direct investment just in the manufacturing sector, the most profitable area for foreign capital, in any of the East Asian countries and ASEAN members turned out to be more than the total for the "rest of Asia".

We cannot expect the process to be reversed. However, there are prospects for major changes in the pattern. During the 39-year period under review, a major portion of this investment was pumped into countries, such as South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, which have now themselves become investors, while in others, like Thailand and Indonesia, rising labour costs discourage increased joint ventures.

In the changing scenario, China continues to offer attractive possibilities, and so does the former Indo-China region. Here, we believe, SAARC member nations, especially Bangladesh, should also figure prominently in this new situation.

Unless we have the details of the proposed mechanism, we would not know how far it will help in stimulating direct investment from Japan for this region. But let us not expect miracles or even a sudden breakthrough. We must also monitor the intense debate that seems to be in progress in major Japanese business centres as well as in ASEAN capitals on Tokyo's economic role in the post-cold war era. Should Japan act as the economic leader of Asia? Or should it be only a prominent member of a new Asian economic community? These are only two of the sensitive questions which have already cropped up during the debate.

What the SAARC countries, especially Bangladesh, can do within their means to improve their investment climate raises other questions for their own consideration. The formulation of new simplified procedures for joint ventures certainly serves a most useful purpose, but it does not necessarily create the climate that foreign investors may find congenial for their operation. Here, the increase in the productivity of the labour force, the reduction, if not elimination, of work stoppages and a stable socio-political climate serve as decisive factors. We have to approach these issues boldly and squarely, taking measures which can make life easier for foreign investors. Unless we move in this direction, we should not expect much to come out of the proposed mechanism discussed in Colombo.

## Teachings of Ashura

The tragedy that befell Hazrat Imam Hossain, his family and followers on this day in the heady times when Islam was just making its uncertain steps is a grim reminder of treachery and greed for power on the one hand, and on the other, a rock-like stand for a cause and principles. Yazid represented the evil power to the extent that the Muslims the world over cannot remember him without a sense of loathing and nausea. Prophet Mohammad's (SM) grandson, Imam Hossain, by all accounts, was an embodiment of virtues and all the good qualities humanly cultivable for anyone. The tragedy is made all the more poignant because it is the evil that triumphed, albeit temporarily, over the good on that fateful day.

Yet it is not a tragedy of the usual sort that leaves a message of despair and pessimism alone. Its deeper meaning is one of hope in that human qualities become victorious in the long run. He who sacrifices best when he upholds the values and principles against overwhelming odds. In the early days of Islam, Hazrat Imam Hossain's sacrifice was monumental. Yazid in his unlimited capacity for villainy and sadism wanted to obliterate an idea — an idea of the beautiful, righteousness and love for the fellow human beings — through sheer brute power. He did not take long to prove wrong.

No wonder, in his momentary victory Yazid lost for ever and in defeat, the ideals and principles of Islam Imam Hossain represented have won once for all. That is significant and the Muslims the world over should inculcate the spirit of the day rather than confining their observance of the occasion to mourning and lamentation. Imam Hossain's was a supreme sacrifice. But the Muslim nations, strife-torn as they are, are yet to learn enough from his sacrifice. Material gains and power craze have stood in the way of making a society where all Muslims and people of other religions as well enjoy an equitable benefits of resources.

Both the Prophet (SM) and his true followers highlighted what a true Muslim society could be through practising the ideals they preached. An ardent follower of Islam and his grandfather, Imam Hossain showed it to the world through laying his own dear life for the cause. Today the affluence in a section of society or in parts of the Muslim world in sharp contrast to the abject poverty in the rest of that world does not reflect enough respect for those ideals and principles. There is a need for emulating the spirit of Ashura by the rich in particular.

**T**HE right to strike is recognised all over the world as a basic right of workers for promoting and safeguarding their interests vis-a-vis the management. Similarly, management has the right to declare lock-out in the plant. The ILO, a unique tripartite organization which represents workers, employers and the Governments, is tireless in its efforts to ensure that these rights are respected by all concerned. Most member countries of the ILO, including Bangladesh, are signatory to these conventions. In Bangladesh, however, strikes are no longer used only by workers to put pressure on management in negotiating contracts for wages and other benefits.

In this country strikes have become a major political weapon in the arsenal of the political parties, student groups as well as other vested interest groups. In fact, the term has acquired a new connotation in Bangladesh. More often than not, a strike in this country is an attempt by a political party to register a protest or a charter of demands and to intimidate the authorities into accepting the demands. The students also resort to strikes for all sorts of reasons including, very often, for political goals. Students in the West — in American or European will find the use of the expression "strike" in a college or university setting as very strange. They would associate this term with industry and not with an academic institution. In any event, for students in the West and also in some Asian countries like Japan or Singapore, the extreme step of boycotting classes is almost an alien thought.

To me this is a phenomenon usually seen only in

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the South Asian sub-continent where anti-British movement legitimized almost any action which placed pressure on the colonial power. The students, as the most idealistic and sensitive section of society, were at the vanguard of the struggle against the British. In Bangladesh the Pakistani interlude only further strengthened the role of the students and youth in national politics. Liberation wars occur only once in the life time of a nation and the glorious role of the students in securing the freedom of the nation should be considered in that historical context. One would have expected that the students would go back to studies after independence. Instead, much to the misfortune of the nation, they have put themselves not only at the vanguard of every movement but these days they have also become the king-makers. The so-called armed cadres have been born and professional student politics has been raised to a level of importance unknown elsewhere. It is a strange evolution. In my extensive travels around the world I have rarely come across the use of strikes in the manner that they are used in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In Europe — perhaps that is where the technique of industrial strike in its present form originated — a general strike is used only in rare situations of national emergency or social upheaval. If my memory serves me right, there were only three general strikes in modern British history. However, in the sub-continent, a general strike is so common that it is resorted to by political parties

as well as students and other pressure groups in order to press any demand, however trivial and insignificant.

In Bangladesh, one observes with disgust and despair, there is absolutely no restraint or check on irresponsible action by a party or a faction or even a group of non-declared individuals masquerading as a party. All they have to do is to declare a strike and enforce it by force. The technique has by now been perfected and fine tuned. A few hooligans are hired and placed

valuable tool in the hands of established political parties if it is not enforced by violence and force. In fact a strike can be a test of a party's popularity or the extent of public support for a cause but only if it is voluntary. But today in Bangladesh there are no voluntary strikes. Hooligans are employed to enforce them by violent means. Major political parties, with well established electoral support and record of public service have been the losers. Under the prevailing circumstances they are clearly at a

## ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

in the strategic corners and key points of the city to attack passing cars, buses and trucks with brickbats and hand bombs to ensure that the streets are deserted. Similarly, the threat of looting and destruction is used to persuade the shop owners to keep their doors shut. Thus the strike is declared to be a "complete success." Even a most unpopular cause, championed by a party enjoying little or no public support can ensure the "success" of a strike.

Thus "strike" in Bangladesh has ceased to be a voluntary form of protest. It is a form of institutionalized lawlessness. As a form of protest it has lost its value and credibility. People seem to take strikes with the same sense of resignation as they do when faced with an act of God. Strike as a form of protest can certainly be a most

great disadvantage vis-a-vis parties with little or no established record of public support. These so-called parties can easily compete with a genuine national party in a test of popularity. All they have to do is to hire some musclemen and it is done. The instinct of survival of the motorists and shop owners takes care of the rest.

One wonders if political leaders, scholars and patriotic people in Bangladesh are conscious about the gross distortion that has taken place of a very useful tool for sound labour-management relations. We talk about terror and violence in the society but we do not see how we are conniving at and even condoning the use of these same tactics for political gains. Did we fight for democracy to legitimize violence in public life? A political

party or a trade union which claims to represent genuine public interest does not have to resort to terror tactics to enforce the strike. In fact the use of violence must be taken as an indication of absence of popular support behind the party in question. If we all agree that Bangladesh today needs a national consensus to curb violence and terrorism in society then strikes enforced by violence must be a part of the consensus. We have to see in what forms violence has entered our political and economic life. We all have witnessed with sinking heart the spectacle of university students going on "strike" to demand the right to beat up their teachers! The tyranny of irresponsible pressure groups must end. The confusion between legitimate industrial action and violent attempt on the part of a tiny group — by whatever name it may call itself — to impose its will on the rest of society cannot be allowed to go on in this manner.

I recognize that it is easier said than done. Pessimists will throw up their hands in despair and put all the blame on either the government or the opposition or the Bengali character. But I do not believe that it is a lost cause. We must shake off lethargy and get together to determine the plan of action. The ruling party as well as the party in opposition have an equal interest in this matter because, I like to believe, they do represent the genuine interest of the nation. There is no reason to believe that they would like to preside over a nation in the grip of terror and violence. Today the

party in power is responsible for the security and welfare of the people; tomorrow the party in opposition will face the same problem. There is thus a case for concerted action by both the parties as well as all peace-loving and patriotic people to stand up to this national crisis.

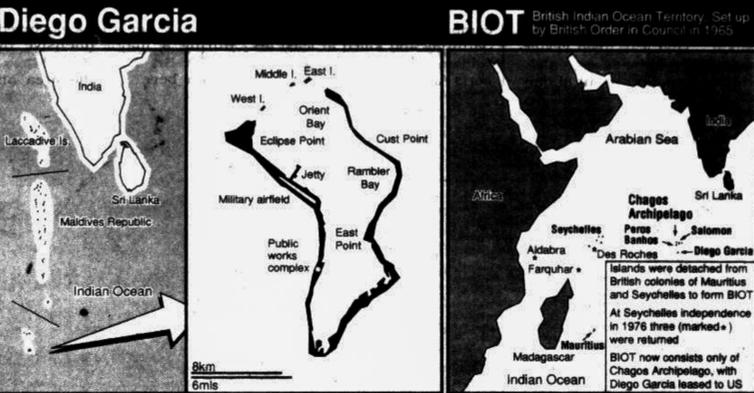
How do we go about it? How about a moratorium on student politics for three years? It is certainly well within the capacity of the two major parties to ensure that such a moratorium is respected. How about a bipartisan accord to refrain from violence in enforcing strikes? Some people may think that this will benefit the government more than the opposition party. I do not believe so. In fact this will be such a shining demonstration of its maturity and commitment to public welfare that the party will earn the gratitude and respect of the ordinary men and women all over the country who yearn for peace and security. An agreement or understanding a long the lines of the now famous "blue print," worked out by the parties during the anti-Ershad movement, will stop the phony parties and selfish pressure groups from imposing their will on the vast majority of people. There are other ways in which one can seek a solution to the problem. It is certainly not beyond human ingenuity to draw up a practical programme to return to a sane and sensible course of action. Indeed that is the only sensible path open to us.

The writer, a former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, has recently returned home after serving ESCAP as its Executive Secretary for 11 years. He writes a weekly piece for this paper as a guest columnist.

# Cold War or Not, Diego Garcia Remains Biggest US Base

by George Bennett

*People displaced from Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean — to make way for a US base — still cannot return even to tend the graves of their ancestors. They might have seen a chance to go home with the end of the Cold War and the drastic arms cuts now planned by the US and Russia. But the loss of US bases in the Philippines now makes Diego Garcia even more important to the Americans.*



Malagasy immigrants, mainly fisherfolk and farmers who exported produce from copra plantations. The British administered it as part of the colony of Mauritius and in 1965 the British Labour government asked the government of Mauritius, then still not independent, to accept £3 million in return for a continuation of British rule over the Chagos Archipelago. Despite a UN resolution advising Britain not to dismember Mauritius, it became independent and the government of Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam agreed that the Archipelago should become

part of what Britain called the British Indian Ocean Territory. This included three other islands — Aldabra, Farquhar and Des Roches — which were later returned to Seychelles. The next year, 1966, Britain gave the US facilities on Diego Garcia as part of a defence agreement. Mauritius became independent in March 1968. The agreement lasts until 2016, with an option to renew for a further 20 years. The atoll was well-placed to monitor and confront developments in the communist world and the US developed half of it as a military base. Barracks built along the shoreline

housed thousands of marines. A runway capable of taking the world's biggest military planes was built and the calm waters in the middle of the horseshoe were a perfect anchorage for aircraft carriers, support ships and nuclear submarines. At the time of the agreement 2,000 people lived in Diego Garcia. The American did not want them there and Britain began to remove them. The copra plantations were run down and the Diego Garchians — known as the Ilois or Islanders — found they could not return home once they had

travelled abroad. Many had regularly visited Mauritius and now they found themselves stuck there. By 1973 all the Ilois had been removed from the Chagos Islands. The last 800 were taken by ship first to two outer islands and then to Mauritius where they were not even met on arrival. Conditions in Mauritius during the 1970s were bad. There was massive unemployment and the Ilois found themselves in slum areas near the capital, Port Louis, in an environment foreign to their way of life. Diego Garcia families suffered from malnutrition, disease and indifference. The Mauritius government and social organisations helped relieve the worst cases of deprivation, but the money Britain gave initially for resettlement and relief was slow in being distributed and there was no real plan to rehouse the refugees and integrate them into Mauritius society. Ilois became a derogatory word. The Americans played no part in resettling the Ilois, but pressure was put on successive British governments to give more money. In 1979 extra compensation was promised, provided the Ilois families signed undertakings never to return to their homeland. Some, but not all, did that but by then the plight of the

Ilois had been publicised in British newspapers and a number of people in Britain and Mauritius were helping to fight their cause.

Yet not until 1982 did Britain give another £4 million (to the original £650,000) which it considered full and final settlement of the Ilois' claim. Mauritius gave land valued at £1 million for their resettlement.

Today most Ilois have been absorbed into Mauritian society. Their children attend better schools than were available in Diego Garcia. But many people feel they were treated shabbily and should not be forgotten. Labour MP Tam Dalyell said the agreements that caused their removal were undertaken in "a most secretive, underhand and shame-making manner."

Mario Fabien, of the Mauritian support group, the Comité Ilois Organisation Fraternelle, told delegates to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro that the US and Britain have a moral duty to do more for the remaining Ilois. Many want to return to Diego Garcia. At present they cannot even go back to tend the graves of their ancestors.

To Mauritius claims for the return of the islands, Britain says sovereignty will not be ceded until they are "no longer needed for defence purposes."

If they are returned the islands and their families — now doubled in numbers from the original 2,000 — will need considerable financial and logistic support to help them rebuild their homeland. — GEMINI NEWS

GEORGE BENNETT is a former head of the Africa Service of the BBC.

## 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.

### Mobile mirrors of sorrows!

Sir, your 'unusual' reaction: "I have stopped guessing about other people's reaction to what I write in this column" (My World 26.5.92) must have been shocking to many of your esteemed readers. The reasons for your 'annoyance' (permit me to use the word) is understandable. But if I can recollect well, in the very first issue of your esteemed daily, you yourself disappointed certain quarters by the fore-warning that none should take "The Daily Star" for granted! Maybe your candid observations and 'biting' comments, however logical they might be, have displeased the present hierarchy. Yet the fact remains that "The Daily Star" with a group of select, dedicated and experienced contributors, has been striving hard to tell the nation that it is in utterly bad shape

and needs thorough overhauling and right direction to clear the mess in almost every sector of national life. Your contributors, most of whom are specialists and experts in their own fields, have been playing the role of 'watch-dogs'. Through their writings they are reminding the concerned quarters of the impending dangers which could be averted only by reading the 'writings on the wall'. But who cares? Certainly our parliament is not a house of shadows. It has many talented and experienced parliamentarians who can rise above party politics and guide the nation to its goal. Perhaps, they have started to realise the 'home-truths'. Some of them have now started to speak against legitimacy of tax-free car and pension. I wonder if your collection of 'jokes' (My World 3.7.92) contain some food for thought for them as well. While

passing through the city streets every day I come across hundreds and thousands of pale faces of men, women and children which look like so many mobile mirrors of sorrows!

Abdul Kader  
Parana Pallan, Dhaka

### Cancer medicines

Sir, For the first time in Bangladesh, a duty of 7.5% has been imposed on all cancer medicines in the budget for the year 1992-93. Keeping in view the very meagre facilities that are available in Bangladesh, the benign Government may drop the above duty immediately.

Shahabuddin Mahab  
Bangladesh Cancer Society

### Export Bank

Sir, The promotion of export trade is of vital importance for the growth of our economy. To accelerate the pace of development of our export oriented industries, the government has announced certain incentives in the present export policy. The creation of Export Development

Fund is one of them. But unfortunately, this has not been implemented as yet for reasons unknown to us.

The necessity of credit for the development of export oriented industries needs hardly to be overemphasised. The credit of this kind can not easily be obtained from the commercial banks for various limitations. Hence we call upon the government to form an 'Export Bank' for the easy availability of credit at a minimum rate of interest.

Nitin Roy,  
Faktrpool, Dhaka.

### Golam Azam — an "issue" or a "non-issue"

Sir, The Golam Azam issue has been a much-discussed-about issue for a couple of months. There have been opinions for a against. Tussles have occurred among those that admire and those that hate. Some quarters including stalwarts in the ruling party have termed this to be a "non-issue". By terming the issue a "non-issue" they are trying to

evade a plain truth. It is beyond one's imagination as to why this is not an issue. To get an answer to this question a simple query will be enough to satisfy a strong argument. Does Bangladesh constitution guarantee right to do politics to a foreign national? The answer, as we know, is negative. Arguments should revolve round this vital provision of our constitution. Golam Azam's admirers, especially in the Government, seemed to have missed this point or are trying hard for a willful distortion of fact. Biography of Golam Azam would certainly show him born in Bangladesh but certainly not a citizen. His citizenship was stripped off because of his heinous acts against the aspirations of the people of this land. What he and his party-men did during our glorious war of independence is still a nightmare.

Muslim League was the party behind the creation of a separate homeland for Muslims — Pakistan. Their political and emotional attachment to Pakistan was understandably much higher than any other party; and therefore, if Muslim League had played the role what Jamaat did during our liberation struggle it wouldn't,

perhaps, be of much surprise. Instead, we witnessed Jamaat to be the champion of Pakistan and an accomplice of unprecedented rape and murder committed by Pakistani army. Rehabilitation of such a debatable man in the political arena of Bangladesh would definitely trigger off people's movement.

Perhaps nothing would have happened if Golam Azam maintained a status quo, and had he not been elected as chief of a party which has its registration in Bangladesh. It is a challenge thrown to the people, and for obvious reasons the people have taken to streets in vehement protests. Elimination committee was formed; and people spontaneously rally round to demand justice for his war crime. This demand, by all standards, is a just demand. It is evident that the immediate cause of such a movement is the election of Golam Azam, a foreign national, as chief of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami. This fundamental point should not be condoned in polemical parleys. Ironically, a "non-issue" has turned out to be an "issue" even for the admirers of Golam Azam.

Ulfat Hossain  
Tejgaon, Dhaka