

Rising Lawlessness in Dhaka

While we are crying hoarse at the top of our voices about the need to give institutional shape to democracy, are we looking around and thinking for a moment what shape we are giving to the fundamental requirements of our civic life? It will not be an exaggeration to say that life in Dhaka is increasingly becoming insecure and almost frightening. Everyday newspapers carry reports of murder, extortion, robbery and house breaking. We are not even referring to assault on women which is an issue of immense concern and must be addressed separately. For every crime that is reported, it is not far from the truth to imagine that there are numerous others that are not. Then there is a whole range of petty thefts like mugging, making away with small cash at gun-point or not paying for purchases from a store or after eating in a restaurant under threat of physical assault, if the owner should insist on being paid. All this has made life in Dhaka city one of insecurity and tension.

The recent mafia-style shoot-out resulting in robbery and killing of the BTC distributor and well known sports enthusiast Mr. Fazlur Rahman (Mona) reveals the sense of impunity that the criminals have come to feel when carrying out their crimes. Mr. Rahman was killed in broad daylight when he was on way to his bank with four of his employees. On Saturday, again in broad daylight, robbery was committed at the office of the distributor of another well-known multinational company. On Thursday, a businessman was killed and robbed of Tk 1.25 lakh. The list is long and chilling.

In addition to the attack by criminals, the citizens of Dhaka, especially those who own cars, face another type of attack from unruly mob. If one happens to be in the wrong place at a wrong moment it is quite possible to have one's car smashed and one's own person violated and robbed. The two sets of crimes cannot be compared except for the fact that both amount to flouting of the law with impunity. And that to us is the most worrying aspect of the present situation. It appears that anybody can break the law and get away with it. There is no fear of being caught and punished. Young men, some who are teenagers, carry fire arms and show them off to friends and opponents, not having any fear that police will apprehend them.

So the question of the moment is how have we allowed things to have come to this pass? Have we realised that gradually the situation is slipping beyond our control; that citizens are losing confidence in the ability of the law enforcing body to protect them from the criminals? Examples of public reaction to similar situation shows that people end up forming their own armed groups for protection—like vigilante groups. This creates further law and order problems as inter-ethnic fight between different groups inevitably follows.

Before life in Dhaka reaches that stage the police should act to restore public confidence in them by taking a tougher stand against the criminals that are terrorising the innocent citizens. The government must give the necessary support—especially by not interfering on partisan lines—to the police to do its job. It is nice to hear the Home Minister claiming in the parliament that the law and order situation has improved. It would have been nicer still if the every day facts did not contradict him.

A Warning for Saddam

Two years after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, which touched off the Gulf War, Baghdad has created another major crisis that may well bring about a fresh armed conflict. Iraq had never been particularly co-operative with the United Nations when, under a resolution of the Security Council, its inspectors had been searching for arms or orders of its weapon purchases. In the latest case, Iraqi authorities have refused to let UN officials enter the Ministry of Agriculture where records of arms of mass destruction may well be hidden.

One theory is, President Saddam Hussein is desperate in protecting whatever weapons he still has at his disposal. With the implementation of the Security Council's resolution chipping away his authority, the Iraqi dictator is losing face with his own people. If this theory is correct, he may well have decided to take a stand—come what may—and provoke an armed conflict.

On the other hand, Saddam may just be trying out the patience of the world body and that of the United States. In the process, he has bullied UN personnel, refused to co-operate with the world body to draw his country's frontier with Kuwait and refused to renew the memorandum of understanding which allows international humanitarian agencies to conduct relief efforts inside Iraq for such peoples as Shias and Kurds, the victims of Baghdad's persecution.

The United States rightly feels that it should take a strong line against Saddam Hussein and call a halt to the drift. There are talks of US air strikes, and the naval forces have entered the area.

While the idea of causing the fall of Saddam Hussein through a direct invasion of Iraq may well be a tempting one to President George Bush, especially for improving the chances in the election, it will be a dangerous course for the United States to follow. At a time when diplomatic options still remain available and the Security Council has not exhausted all its choices, any unilateral action taken by Washington will further divide the Arab nations and, indeed, perhaps the entire Muslim world. Meanwhile, countries which can still talk to Saddam, especially Jordan, must tell the Iraqi president that he has gone too far in flouting the United Nations and unless he changes his current posture, he may be pushing his country to the brink of another war. This warning should be heard, loud and clear, by Saddam Hussein.

THE collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union has changed the world political scene so fundamentally that the concepts and doctrines of security and balance of power have all changed beyond recognition. Eastern Europe has abandoned the Marxist system; instead, all these countries are trying to introduce market driven economic systems. The Warsaw Pact is no longer there to stand against NATO. The NATO members do not know what to do with it. Indeed the world has entered a new period—a period in which a new pattern of international relations is gradually taking shape. The United States remains the only super power but its economic difficulties puts a limit on its capacity to act as the world's policeman. Thus we are in a period of some uncertainty about the emerging pattern of world political scene. There is a growing belief (but not yet a consensus) that the UN must play the role envisaged in the Charter. There is yet no sign that it will soon assume such power and responsibility. Thus we have really no viable option but to wait and see how the great powers as well as the regional powers work out a political system which will ensure peace and stability.

While the world political situation is in a state of flux, there is taking place, rather quietly, a profound change in the global economy. This may be seen in two parallel but equally powerful trends. The first one is the increase in interdependence among nations. It hardly needs elaboration. The economies including the capital markets and currencies of the world have become inextricably intertwined. Govt. leaders, bankers and businessmen have to constantly monitor the changes in the exchange and interest rates. Capital and technology move across the borders of sovereign states with astonishing speed and perfect ease. Even labour has started to move, despite many barriers, from low to

The benefits of an enlarged market would be a powerful motivation if it can be organized in a manner designed to safeguard the interest of the smaller and economically weaker partners. The key lies with India. The relatively large size of its economy and the range of its products requires some special measures to ensure that the smaller countries are not subjected to undue pressures and disadvantages.

high wage countries. Recession in major markets such as the United States or the EEC causes not ripples but waves in distant lands where income and employment are linked with these markets. The great transnational corporations operate in different countries and relocate industries from one to the other with confidence and without much restriction. The Gulf War demonstrated vividly the extent of interdependence among nations. The disruption of the economy of a small country like Kuwait affected hundreds of thousands of people in more than a dozen countries. The East and South East Asian countries, riding the crest of new found prosperity, depend on the markets in North America and Europe to maintain the momentum of growth. The poorest countries, unable to mobilize domestic savings necessary for investment for sustained growth, depend on the international community for aid and credit to finance their development efforts. Thus it is no exaggeration to say that today we truly live in a global village.

There is however a different trend—indeed a very powerful trend—towards consolidation of regional and sub-regional groups. The European Community is the most important example of the growing strength of this trend. Of course, the EEC is attempting more than mere co-operation in some selected fields; it is a whole new experiment in erasing borders which stood between nations and, over the centuries, led to destructive wars. In Asia we have seen the emergence of ASEAN as a successful example of sub-regional co-operation. Their political and military needs provided the motivation but gradually the scope has been enlarged. Despite many hurdles along

the way they are now aiming at eventual customs union. The United States is an economic giant with a vast internal market but reacting to the developments in Europe it has taken the initiative to organize the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) with Canada and Mexico as partners. The impact of NAFTA on world trade is yet to be seen as the group takes final shape. But the repercussion on Asian exports is certainly not going to be favourable. Mexico, with its low wage economy, may attract at least some of the simple processing industries on which the Asian countries currently depend. The Latins

and Japan's role as a world economic super power may pose many problems. Thus we see these two parallel trends in the world today. The South Asian countries are not immune to these trends. Responding to the winds of change, all these countries have opted for liberal economic policies—less restrictive, more export oriented and dependant on the private sector for providing the thrust for growth. The nascent manufactured exports are trying hard to secure a foothold in European and North American markets. Unfortunately however their record in strengthening economic co-operation

if it can be organized in a manner designed to safeguard the interest of the smaller and economically weaker partners. The key lies with India. The relatively large size of its economy and the range of its products requires some special measures to ensure that the smaller countries are not subjected to undue pressures and disadvantages. Non-reciprocal trade agreements between India and its small and less developed neighbours is the first and most important step in this direction. The trade figures between India and Bangladesh illustrates this point beyond any reasonable doubt. India has to agree to provide preferential treatment to its small and less developed neighbours in order to organize a viable trade regime. Pakistan is perhaps the only country which can have trade with India on an equal term. This is a fundamental issue. As the biggest country of the region India happens to be in the unique position to lay a solid foundation on which SAARC can move ahead. All the countries including India will benefit. The example of EEC should be an eye opener to India. Have they not found formulae to protect the weaker economies of Portugal, Spain and Greece? Our future thus depends on the vision and statesmanship of our leaders. Instead of rhetoric they should get down to the real business of working out practical measures of co-operation in trade, investment, joint ventures and technology transfer. The influence that we can exert as individual countries—even a big country like India—is far less than what we can have as a cohesive group. In a world increasingly interdependent but also increasingly regionalized in economic and even political matters we can derive optimum

advantage only by putting some substance to SAARC.

To my mind, confidence building is the most important task for our leaders. Confidence can be built only on a genuine foundation. The common people will get concrete benefits from stepped up trade in an enlarged market, opportunities for investment and joint ventures and above all, a voice in the world community. Those who have observed the "dialogues" between the ASEAN on one side and EEC, USA, Japan and others like Australia, Canada etc on the other side will appreciate the implications of what I am referring to. This is the crux and let us hope that the next summit will provide a break through in this most vital and critical field. There is no doubt in my mind that in the long run all the countries—including India—will benefit even if it agrees to give non-reciprocal trading facilities to its smaller neighbours. The Summit will be a worthwhile effort only if this issue is addressed seriously. Somehow we seem to have given too much attention to ceremonies and protocol and not enough attention to the interests of the people. Their interest lies in speedier economic and social development and that can be achieved only through the optimum utilization of our economic potentials. The sterile politics and the tired rhetoric of the past is no longer relevant in today's world. I hope our leaders will realize the fundamental change taking place around us. We must get out of the cocoon of the past. The forthcoming summit will be meaningful if the leaders are prepared to find solutions to economic issues on the basis of give and take and keeping in view the long term interests of the people of the region. Four decades of hatred and military confrontations have kept this vast region in poverty and backwardness. Is it not time for our leaders to look at the real interests of the people of the region?

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

are not lagging behind. Brazil and Argentina are forging, in co-operation with their smaller neighbours, a customs union to harness the vast internal market. The trend around the world towards increasingly complex arrangements for regional co-operation is indeed very strong. The Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union have lost no time in linking up with their neighbours—Turkey and Iran in particular—to reap the benefits of trade and investment in a larger economic and geographical area. There have been tentative efforts in the recent past among the East Asian countries to organize co-operation in selected fields. In fact, the possibility of a regional group with the membership of China, Japan, the two Koreas and Mongolia may not be too far fetched though lingering unhappy memories of

among themselves leaves much to be desired. We have neither taken full advantage of the opportunities in the global market nor have we consolidated ourselves regionally to take advantage of a large regional market and the economies of scale. The creation of SAARC at the initiative of Bangladesh aroused great expectations but the political climate during the last decade has been so bad that despite several summits and a lot of rhetoric not much has been achieved in tangible terms. For obvious political reasons the fields chosen for co-operation initially were innocuous ones such as agriculture, meteorology, culture and sports etc. But a regional group can make an impact only if it moves into vital economic activities such as trade, investment, joint ventures and transfer of technology. The benefits of an enlarged market would be a powerful motivation

Exodus back to Mother Russia

Hundreds of Russian Jews begin a trek back to Russia now that Communism has collapsed and dreams remain unfulfilled in their new homeland in Israel. Joanne Levine of IPS reports from Moscow.

ends meet. Jost Ben Dor, himself a Russian emigre who now works as press attache for the Israeli Embassy here acknowledges that there have been problems, largely because there is no selection process. "Our gates are open to everyone." For many of the 400,000 Soviet Jews, who packed their bags and fled to Israel over the past three-and-a-half years, life has been difficult. Stripped of their social security blankets, Soviet emigres found themselves on their own, without work or adequate housing. While new immigrants in Israel receive a government stipend to cover housing and living expenses during their first year in the country, they have to learn Hebrew in order to find a job. But although learning the Hebrew language is difficult, it proves to be an easy task compared to landing work in Israel. Official data show that 50 per cent of new immigrants in Israel are unemployed while only 20 per cent of the newcomers find a job related to their profession in the Soviet Union—but usually at a lower status.

Those who are over 45 years of age have even a harder time looking for work, many of them already being pushed to survive below the poverty line. Vadim, who came back with his mother last October, still cherishes his Israeli passport and dreams about returning one day. But his mother said her overall experience was humbling, and she has vowed not to return. According to Karablova, there are too many Russian refugees in Israel looking for work. In any case, she believes the new-found freedom in her homeland will provide more opportunities to do business and earn money. "Also, in Israel I felt more discriminated against than here. The situation is similar to how refugees from the republics are treated in Moscow," she claims. Still, while Russian immigration officials say the bulk of

returning Jews are from Israel, some are also coming back from places like the United States. Some are seizing new business opportunities. Others feel a need to help rebuild their birthplace. One Jewish emigrant, who was denounced as an "enemy of the people" when he first applied to leave in 1975, but is now an adviser to the Russian government on economic issues, said reason why they are returning is simply for money. After living in the United States for several years, the middle-aged executive returned on business for one week in 1988. "I was scared," he recalls. "The grey misery hit me again. It was the most difficult week of my life. I took months to get over it." He has since shuttled back and forth to Moscow, ultimately deciding to relocate here temporarily with his fam-

ily. "I know exactly why I am here," he says. "I get paid for it. When the job is done I will leave. I am a US citizen." Twenty-three-year-old Masha Chursina, who left Moscow in 1981 with her mother to live in both the United States and Israel, has a different philosophy. Though her mother was Jewish, Chursina never knew about her religion until she was 11 years old, and said anti-Semitism had nothing to do with her leaving or returning. "There are so many possibilities. The people who are here now are forming what will be tomorrow, despite the difficulties." Chursina, who works for a foreign firm involved with media relations, has high aspirations. She is working on several projects that involve kids. "It has to be the new generation that changes things." Chursina still considers herself Russian even though she has spent more than half her life abroad. "I owe my free spirit to the West," she said. "But I don't miss it."

OPINION

Challenges to Democracy

M Rashid Ahmed

This, though belated, is in response to the commentary "Discard conspiracy theory, it only distorts perspective" by S M Ali, published in "The Daily Star" on 13 May. The idea of conspiracy is floated by the government and opposition from the very inception of Bangladesh, and as per inference of the commentator it has vitiated the atmosphere, diverging the people from the real problems facing them. It has become a phrase-mongering by the political parties in general, and the government in particular which portrays their lack of accountability. To it is added the practice of branding political adversaries as traitors and even veteran politicians and opponents are detained with the accusation of activities subversive to the state. Although state and government are not synonymous.

With the stroke of a pen the present government dissolved the Upazila Parishad (UZP)—the political-administrative pivot of the local government and peoples participation. Whatever side-effects and para-phenomena the UZP might have created needs remedy and betterment. The dissolution of UZP has snatched the people's share in the local government and created a vacuum with the halage of all economic activities. UZP dissolution is followed by the dissolution of all representatives of municipality with a fresh date for election. And the elections abruptly postponed. District councils are having no elected representatives. With the dissolution of UZP the union council chairmen are no longer its members. Thus the country has no people's representatives in any tier of the local government. This is not from an elected government.

Let's seek a remedy. Phrase-mongering should give way to practical demonstration of good-will and pragmatism. Let all the voices and opinions surface in a disciplined and creative manner. The vital social forces comprising the professionals, intellectuals and working people side by side with politicians take up role in the building of national consensus. This social force comprises the different socio-economic groups and interests and should be included in the policy-making in the statecraft. Sorting national problems and their solutions has to be sought in all aspects of the politico-socio-economic arena and a new political technology evolved ensuring representation and participation of all in the running of the country.

The present trend of vindictiveness towards the opponents makes the government questionable of its democratic norms. Personal vindictiveness and revenge should never be allowed as it not only erodes the fragile basis of democracy but also pushes away a probable ally. This also gives rise to the theory of conspiracy with the make-belief imaginary stories. And it is fuelled by the ever-reigning bureaucracy—the behind the scene rulers. The present government has the unique advantage of being elected to the position by a fair and free poll. And thus the present government is outcome of the movement by Awami League, BNP, the Five-Party Alliance and Jamaat-e-Islami. This fact is to be stated because all the four alliances have to share the responsibility of any mishaps hindering democracy. Though political parties with traditional colonial make-up are not enough to institutionalise democracy, this is a historical truth, and accepting it other socio-economic forces have to be accommodated in the process of democratisation. The dangers for democracy in the present context may be enumerated as the followings: 1) accumulation of power in the centre with the destruction of local government; 2) parliament members not hav-

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.

Foreign Travel Tax

Sir, I request the kind attention of the National Board of Revenue to alleviate the suffering of airline and travel industry employees which may arise due to change in the structure of assessing Foreign Travel Tax (FTT) in the recent budget proposals. The rules for FTT, prior to the current budget, allowed the travel industry employees holding non-revenue or rebated tickets, to pay a flat rate of Tk 250 for non-revenue tickets, and a fixed percentage of the fare paid on the rebated ticket with a maximum of Tk 1500 or Tk 500 when travelling to non-SAARC or SAARC country respectively. In the current budget this distinction has been removed, and the travel industry employees are required to pay the same FTT as the normal fare paying passenger, which is now based on destination to which the ticket has been issued. This change in the basic rules whereby a travel industry employee is equated at par with the normal fare paying passenger for payment of FTT is not logical. Travel on free or rebated tickets by airline and travel related employees is an industry privilege recognised internationally, and considera-

tion should be given to the travellers under this category. In fact when such travel tax was first introduced in Bangladesh during the early 70s, non-revenue tickets were assessed at Tk 100, and when FTT was reintroduced by the previous autocratic government, the exception for travel industry employees was included, which has continued till the new current budget was announced. It may be mentioned that the number of such travellers on free and rebated tickets is so small that it will not upset the revenue target proposed but, on the other hand, will give immense relief to the low-income travel industry employees including Bangladesh Biman and travel agents whose business require a first hand knowledge of the countries they sell tickets for to the travelling public, when they are going on familiarization trips or on airline business, training/courses or even on their personal vacation. Due to recent recession, such travel is extremely limited and airline staff going on vacation get such entitlement as per the airline's own rules which is, in most cases, once a year only. I wish to thank the National Board of Revenue in advance to kindly consider the matter at

the earliest and to make it possible for those working in the airline and travel industry of Bangladesh, to kindly retain maximum FTT at Taka 250—as they are also principal source to promote tourism in Bangladesh through visits abroad whenever required for aviation reasons. Shahid Iqbal Minto Road, Dhaka

Unclaimed bodies

Sir, Recently a Bangla language daily in one of its news items stated the problems involved in dealing with the bodies of the dead particularly the unclaimed ones. Police usually delays in collecting and sending the bodies of persons who are killed in accidents or murdered etc. to the morgue for post-mortem because it requires quite a good amount of money to complete all the formalities. If a body is claimed by a relative, then it is alright otherwise, police have to pay for collecting the body and getting its post-mortem done at the morgue under their supervision. There are some trained and experienced constables for dealing with such bodies. Since the fund is too limited for the purpose, the concerned police officer and the constables have to pay all the fees including tips to the Dom for performing all the formalities. The government provision is Tk 500 to 1000/- depending on distance but the actual expenditure involved is rather high which ranges from Tk 2500 to Tk 3000/-. Since the fund is too meagre, it takes months to get the bill paid. Moreover, the authorities

wouldn't pay the money before clearance from the Judicial wing of the District Administration. And they wouldn't pay the exact expenditure. As such, the police personnel become financially loser. We request the authority to make the matter easier and rational. M Zahidul Haque Assistant Professor, BAC, Dhaka

Hartal damages and loss

Sir, I appreciate Mr. S. M. Ali's views on hartal expressed through his column at Home and Abroad which indeed reflects the common concern of all patriotic people of the country. The hartals being staged one after another by political parties and labour organisations—recognised or otherwise—after the democratically elected Government is installed are no different than those during the last autocratic regime. The violence and damage to public property is just what anybody should expect from such hartals whose sole purpose was to negate the law-abiding citizens their normal life and instigate the people to break the law, not to speak of the enormous loss that it inflicts upon the fledgling economy of the country where the vast majority of people languish below poverty level. It is dangerous to the organisers and Members of the Parliament involved to pretend otherwise. It is not far to lead the country to anarchy. Syed Badrul Haque Lalmita, Dhaka