

Session Jam Saga

1985+4=1992. Anybody can see this is no arithmetic. But when the students of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) carry this faulty sum on their rag-day banner, one cannot help pausing and pondering over what might have been amiss. For knowing people, however, it is no revelation that students getting admitted in the year 1985 have required to spend at the BUET till 1992 for completion of the 4-year course. The students have quite ingeniously cut a joke — perhaps an influence of their rag-day mood — at the cost of their own academic years. No less than three unaccounted years in the total are more than mere numbers. Three thousand students had to lose long three years for no fault of their own. These are, moreover, among the best students the present education system can produce.

Evidently, the rag-day banner has, through the wrong sum, directed the focus on the imperfection of the systems — both educational and social. Educational, because, compared to other universities, where violence is the order of the day and has been responsible for the session jam, the BUET classes are held almost regularly in a relatively peaceful atmosphere. Yet, this university, in a frantic attempt, tried to remove the back-log by merging the sessions of 1986-87 and 1987-88 together. But the trick did not work in much the same way the BUET authorities had envisioned. The students who passed the higher secondary exam in 1990 and got admitted in the university are still waiting for their classes to begin. Again the authorities are looking for the short-cut solution — a merger of the 1991-92 and 1992-93 sessions together.

The step may prove advantageous for the university authorities for the time being, but clearly this is an absurd solution to the problem. It is exactly at this point the social imperfection counts — and counts following the established rule that a fish starts rotting at its head. When the other universities remain closed days on end and sometimes for months and in the process accumulate an intractable back-log of several years, the BUET also feels it can afford the luxury of some years' session jam. It does not simply have the compulsion to prove its competitive edge when the others have long abandoned the race.

In the process, it is the students who become the losers directly, but indirectly, however, the entire country loses. And the loss is incalculable. There is no reason to think that the university authorities are not aware of the colossal wastage — in terms of time, money and talent. A three-member commission set up in 1987 by the university's academic council identified the present system of education as defective and put forward suggestions to come out of the morass. Inexplicably, those suggestions have been shelved. Another committee instituted in the middle of this academic session strongly suggested decentralisation of holding classes and taking exams by different departments. Whether this would have helped remove the session jam through a competition among the departments is debatable. But when the juggernaut has decided not to move at all, why not give it a violent shake? At least such a try would not have made the situation much worse. Each department already has separate paraphernalia for holding classes and exams, if not its own set of rules.

Higher studies flourish in an atmosphere free of any kind of restrictions. Why the teachers have backed out from accepting the offer in which challenge is there for them to prove their ability is not understandable.

Emergency in Somalia

The disaster facing the East African nation of Somalia is now confirmed to be greater than even that which nearly decimated neighbouring Ethiopia seven years ago. According to press reports, a quarter of Somali children face death from starvation, threatening to wipe out an entire generation of Africans. The harrowing situation, brought about by a total collapse of authority in the wake of a bloody, internecine war among guerrilla forces which overthrew President Siad Barre last year, is now threatening to turn into the worst famine ever to visit the Horn of Africa. But strangely, the response from the world community to this impending catastrophe has been mute.

The UN Security Council, which passed no end of resolutions setting out the legal parameters of international intervention against Iraq and more recently Serbia, does not seem in the least bothered by this awesome wind of famine and death blowing through the desolate and war-ravaged landscape of Somalia. The UN has passed resolutions creating what it called a "safe haven" for Kurds in northern Iraq; the UN has imposed sanctions against Serbia; the UN has authorised military action by European states to protect relief convoys to Bosnia-Herzegovina; and the other day, the United States, Britain and France ordered an air-exclusion zone over southern Iraq, ostensibly to protect Iraqi Shias from bombardment by Baghdad's aircraft.

In all those situations, political interests, particularly of the West, and existence of an "enemy" to act against, worked to create pressure on the UN. What do we have in the case of Somalia? We have a non-responsive UN; a relief effort that neighbouring Kenya has blasted as uncoordinated; and a US involvement which Nairobi apparently sees more as a military mission than a humanitarian one. Kenya is clearly alarmed by the US policy of bypassing of relief agencies and using its own troops to transport and distribute the food. Before we criticise Kenya for its apparent insensitivity to the gravity of the crisis, we should understand it is a sovereign state and the US cannot simply send in its forces without proper consultation, permission and coordination. The US has made it a ritual to seek UN backing for international action and it should do the same now. Famine is a far worse enemy of mankind than Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosovic could ever be, and the United Nations should take the lead in goading the world into fighting this marauder. The UN would serve humanity far better by saving lives of children than by going into heroic wars against dictators.

SOCIALISM has lost out. Despite resistance from the faithful in some countries who believe that this is a mere retreat and that ultimate victory is theirs, there is a race to embrace the so-called liberal economic policy under a market driven system. Nobody is sure, however, about the precise elements of such a policy. Countries like Bangladesh which are totally dependent on foreign assistance to stay afloat, have little choice but to accept the World Bank-IMF definition of the policy. Others not in such a plight interpret the policy in the light of their needs and experience.

I have no problem with the enthusiasm for the market driven system. In fact I am fully convinced that the discipline of the market is what we need in Bangladesh to bring about some order and efficiency in the economic system. However, let us not shut our eyes to the realities of life. In conditions such as we have in Bangladesh, can we really do without planning? Our resources are too few and the shortages are too many to permit us the luxury of sitting back in the hope that the magic of the market will ensure the allocation of resources to the most productive sectors, bring down prices and create an ideal situation for accelerating the growth process. Can the market also ensure equity? With social tension building up to an explosive level, a high growth rate cannot be sustained for long if the society is seething with unrest and discontent.

Although the socialist economic system is no longer considered a successful model, it would be a mistake to think that the world is reverting to a capitalist system of the Adam Smith vintage. 18th century economics cannot serve our needs today. Experience of the last two hundred years has taught us that unregulated private enterprise can create a society in which the weak and the poor will get poorer and the wealth of the society will get concentrated in the hands of a fortunate few. A policy

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package which will promote growth with equity is, therefore, essential to maintain peace, harmony and sustained growth. Looking at the wide spread poverty in Bangladesh to day I am convinced more than ever that this is an indispensable condition for stability and progress. Society must have a broad consensus about the basic outlines of the nation's development goals. This goal has to be set by the government after discussion and consultation at the national level. In my view, this is the first step in planning.

A rich and developed country can depend on the market forces to guide the economy. However, in Bangladesh or countries with similar constraints, it is not possible to leave matters to chance. The government, in these countries, must determine the long term goal, establish sectoral priorities, develop the infrastructure and ensure that the policy framework and the incentive structure are right. Government intervention is therefore essential to guide the economy along paths which reflect the nation's aspirations. The East and South East Asian countries followed a strategy in which the government played a key role at every stage of their development process. In Japan, for example, the government has always been in the driver's seat. In 1960 the govt of Japan launched, what they called, an income-doubling plan. They succeeded in achieving the goal in 7 years instead of the planned 10 years! Commenting on the role of the government in this miracle, Dr Soburo Okita, a former Foreign Minister and world renowned economic thinker (and also the author of the income-doubling plan) said "the role of the government is to create a climate in which the private sector can act, to remove any barriers that may arise, and to indicate general directions." Dr Okita believes that the "private sector must be the driving force

for the attainment of any goals or targets for industry in general." However he also believes that "though the government may want to assist these corporate efforts, to offer stimulation, and encourage industry to work towards set goals, its economic role can only be complementary and indirect."

In my view the Japanese achieved a fine balance in the management of their economy and it is not too late for us to learn from their experience. In

way of combining market mechanism and government planning". According to him this is especially important as the developing countries seek to define new relations and divisions of responsibility between the public and private sectors. Unlike the industrial countries, the developing countries can be said to need govt intervention not only to offset market failures, but also because their private sector economies are less mature and

not even survive. I have been wondering how the same liberal policy in Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand leads to the growth of flourishing industries while in Bangladesh the opposite is happening. As a matter of principle we should all support free trade but at this stage of our growth, developing countries such as Bangladesh cannot offer reciprocal trade facilities without endangering its own nascent industries. What we need therefore is a balance between a liberal import policy and the need to give reasonable protection to our manufacturing facilities. After all, the aim of the liberal economic policy is to promote and not to throttle the growth process. The different rates of import duties levied on electronic goods seems to be an example in which the local assembling units are sacrificed in favour of finished products from abroad. Admittedly these industries should not expect a level of protection which takes away all incentives for increasing efficiency and productivity. However, given the consumer preference for products made abroad, the local industries ought to be given, at least a marginal advantage. The playing grounds must be level to ensure that our small manufacturing and processing plants are not wiped out by the over-enthusiastic application of an abstract policy. Even in the United States, the champion of free trade and private enterprise, the government intervenes when local industries and employment are threatened by unfair competition or what they consider to be unfair competition.

In Japan as well as other East and South East Asian countries it is an integral part of the national strategy to support indigenous industry. Industrialists are not viewed as exploiters out to make a quick buck at the cost of the consumers. Government policy is designed to permit foreign

competition just enough to stimulate efficiency, higher productivity and introduction of new and cost-effective technology but not to make it impossible for local units to survive. In Bangladesh it is the importers with the shiny brief case who seem to have the edge in getting the attention of the authorities.

There is, therefore, a need for balance in pursuing the so-called liberal economic policy. Such a policy has many elements. For example, we must, as a matter of high priority, remove the excessive and often unnecessary bureaucratic procedures and controls currently in force to permit the private sector to operate in a regulated but supportive environment. While the regulatory institutions must be reorganized and strengthened the government should withdraw, in a planned manner, from the production and distribution sectors. The policy of privatization should be implemented in a way which is consistent with the long term plans of the government and not in a haphazard fashion. There must be dialogue on a continuing basis between the representatives of the private sector and the government in order to ensure that the govt policies as well as long term goals of the government are fully understood by the businessmen. Only then can we expect them to respond by making plans for investment in new plants and expansions which are consistent with these goals. Thus planning has a big role in the development strategy for a resource-poor country such as Bangladesh. We must harness our very limited resources, guide and support the entrepreneurs, provide the necessary infrastructure and upgrade the human resources.

We must therefore achieve a balance between planning and the free play of the market forces. The nation's progress is likely to be both smooth and rapid if its resources and energies are carefully directed to the most constructive channels.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

a lecture delivered in 1992 in Bombay Dr Okita listed the areas in which the government must play a role. Apart from the physical infrastructure in which the government has a primary responsibility, he emphasized the importance of investing in people. "It is essential" he said, "that development planners and strategists realize how very important the governments' role is in the development of human resources. Although elementary education, health and hygiene, nutrition, and the other basic human needs generally yield low short term financial returns, it should be noted that they can yield a very high economic return if they are effectively planned and implemented. Equally important is the role of the govt to construct necessary infrastructure such as road, port, communications, power, etc, keeping balance with the private sector." Dr Okita also stressed the importance of "long term policy consistency and compatibility" and the need to take the cultural components in planning development. It is significant indeed that against the background of Japanese economic miracle and his own profound knowledge and experience Dr Okita recommended developing countries to "find an effective

their markets underdeveloped compared to those in the industrial countries."

I have quoted extensively from Dr Okita's speech because I believe there are lessons to be learnt from the experience of Japan. Looking at the strategy followed by Taiwan, South Korea and other countries in the Pacific rim, one can see the influence of the Japanese model. In all these countries, perhaps with some variations, the goals were set by the government and while the private sector was the main agent of growth, it was guided and supported by the government at every step. A mutually supportive relationship between the govt and the private sector was a key factor in their success.

Bangladesh has also embraced the market economic system. But how are we implementing the policy? Is there long term policy consistency? Are the goals clearly defined and understood by the people? Let us look at the area of industrial development. Is the new import policy designed to encourage local manufacturing units? I am told that the changes made recently in import duty will adversely affect many industrial units and some of them will

How PLO Divides over Who would Follow Arafat

Michael Jansen writes from Nicosia

In the wake of the escape from death of Yasser Arafat, the PLO leadership is divided over the need to ensure the leadership succession. Arafat himself would rather not consider the problem. And the man who currently stands to take over is no one's first choice. Gemini News Service analyses the power play within the PLO hierarchy.

YASSER Arafat's airplane crash in April and brain surgery in June, followed a week later by the assassination in Paris of his security chief, Atef Besios, demonstrated once again the fragility of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) leadership.

The PLO has had ample proof of this for many years, but took no action because Arafat refused to plan for his succession.

He could afford to take this line until 1988 when an Israeli hit squad in Tunis assassinated Khalil Wazir, the military chief and coordinator of resistance in the occupied territories. Wazir was Arafat's chosen successor.

The need to designate was driven home a second time in 1990 when Arafat's second choice, Salah Khalaf, was killed — allegedly by the renegade Abu Nidal group.

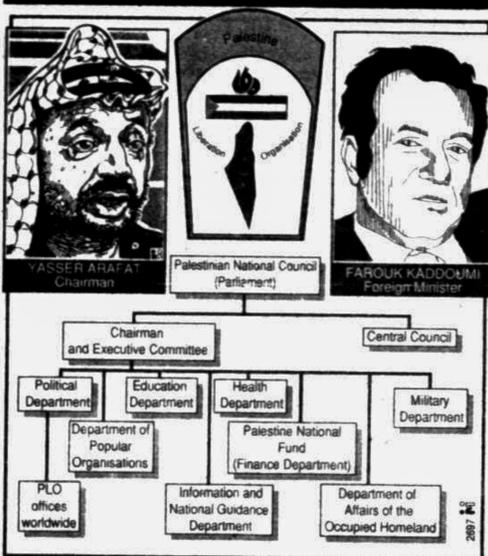
Today the man who stands to inherit the chairmanship if Arafat were to die or be incapacitated is Farouk Kaddoumi — the choice of both no one and everyone.

He is no one's choice because neither Arafat nor office holders in the PLO political institutions have selected him. Yet Kaddoumi, PLO "foreign minister," would probably succeed by consensus because he is colourless and acceptable to more Palestinians and Arab governments than alternative candidates.

Kaddoumi is originally from the large West Bank town of Nablus. He was a founder of Arafat's Fatah Movement, which dominates the PLO, and had an influential constituency in the Gulf until the Kuwait crisis.

Although reputed to be a "hardliner" because he once

How the PLO works



belonged to the Baath Party and retains links with Damascus. Kaddoumi is essentially an "Arafatist" acceptable to most Arab governments, particularly to Jordan, the PLO's partner in the peace process.

Kaddoumi has two main competitors: Mahoud Abbas and Khaled Al-Hassan. Abbas is

considered an "extreme moderate," as he played a leading role in developing PLO contacts with leftist Israelis.

But since the pro-PLO leadership in the occupied territories now has daily contact not only with the left-wing, on the margin of the Israeli political establishment,

but also with the right-wing, Abbas has lost his role as chief conciliator.

Al-Hassan, the PLO's first "foreign minister," a moderate intellectual with close ties to Saudi Arabia, is a leading member of the Fatah dissidents critical of Arafat's decision to back Iraq in the Gulf war (which was popular with the Palestinian people every where).

An independent member of the PLO Central Committee, the upper house of its parliament-in-exile, gave Arafat a 90 per cent acceptability rating, Kaddoumi 35-45 per cent, Abbas 10 per cent and Al-Hassan 3-5 per cent.

In June it was reported from the West Bank that Kaddoumi, Abbas and Al-Hassan might form a triumvirate to succeed Arafat if he was no longer in charge. In that event the three would jockey for position and weaken the chairmanship.

Although for the present the line of succession seems clear, pressure has been building within the PLO for democratisation and structural reform. It intensified after Arafat's escape in April and led to demands that he should gradually yield power to a "collective leadership."

The demands came from the Leftist Fronts (the Popular Front of Dr. George Habash and the Democratic Front of Naif Hawatmeh) and the Fatah dissidents.

The Fronts want change because Arafat has effectively excluded them from decision-making and because they argue that Arafat's policy of "peace at any price" within the US-sponsored talks with Israel has made no progress.

Fatah dissidents blame Arafat for alienating the Saudis and Gulf states which, before the Gulf war, financed the PLO. Neither the Fronts nor the Fatah dissidents want democratisation, but seek only to wrest decision-making and the power of the purse from Arafat.

If they succeeded, the Executive would be deadlocked because the two groups have opposing policies, and corruption, already rife, could increase since more people would be able to put their hands into the PLO purse.

A strident campaign by these factions after Arafat's crash in Libya alienated most of the 100-member Central Council, which met in Tunis in May. The Council agreed with Arafat that the succession, reform and democratisation should be considered later.

Following his brain operation in June, these issues were discussed at meetings between Arafat and members of all three PLO bodies, the Executive, the Central Council and the National Council.

Again formal decision on PLO structures were postponed to await Arafat's recovery from surgery, but extensive

informal consultations took place.

The reformers want to democratise the PLO by taking control from the guerrilla leaders who have dominated it since 1968, when they ousted Ahmad Shukairy, installed by the Egyptians.

The guerrilla leaders, mainly from Fatah, have until recently continued to cling to the illusion that Palestine could be liberated by force of arms, although Arafat had abandoned the "armed struggle" in favour of political struggle.

Arafat's important achievements, recognised by all Palestinians, however grudgingly, are three. He put Palestine back on the world agenda. He won and maintained a Palestinian independence from Arab governments eager to dominate the movement and exploit the cause. And, he imposed unity on the PLO — composed of six guerrilla factions plus independents — by exercising total control.

But the PLO has paid for his miscalculations and his choice of administrators. Many have been inept. This is why the reformers, who would like Arafat to remain chairman as long as he can, want to put the PLO on a constitutional basis with checks and balances and evolve a power-sharing formula to include Palestinians living under Israeli occupation and those in the diaspora.

The reformers also want to institute financial accountability, stem corruption and rebuild Palestinian institutions destroyed when the PLO was expelled from Lebanon in 1982. So far Arafat has been able to resist pressure for change, but his own too-obvious mortality has ensured that he can resist no longer.

To the Editor...

BTV programme on traffic jam

Sir, Indeed it is gratifying to hear a police officer admit that there are more than two lac illegal rickshaws in Dhaka. Taking cue from his courage (in a recent BTV programme) may this be said that if the law enforcing agencies take care to do their job, all problems, including the traffic ones, can be solved with the help of existing laws to a great extent. In recent past successive governments were found to enact stricter laws to solve various problems. Whereas the cause for the increase of trouble in most cases are the failure to implement existing law. But this has been said so many times.

For example, if vehicle drivers are inspired to stop as soon as the traffic light changes from green and to wait where they can see the light from, a lot of traffic problem can be solved without

going for stricter rules. The traffic police on duty has to be trained to enforce this age old rule.

I tried to contact the given phone numbers (but failed as those were continuously engaged) to communicate my view that the rickshaws in Dhaka would be reduced if people walked short distances wherever possible. Training of the traffic police in enforcing rules and educating city-dwellers are two cheaper ways to tackle the gigantic problem.

M A Haq
Green Road, Dhaka.

Overbridges and subways

Sir, Several years back when the overbridge was being constructed at Farm Gate a news appeared in the national dailies that the authorities had plans to construct as many as 35 overbridges at different places in the city. But in sub-

sequent years no such activities were noticed. Neither the Government nor the Municipal authorities have given any indication as to their future plan in this respect.

Dhaka Railway Station was shifted from Fulbaria to Kamalapur at a considerable expense to ease the traffic jam which had very often caused irritating inconveniences to the general public. The same problem has arisen necessitating further shifting of the railway station to some other site, as the suffering public only know well, how the people from the western side of the railway station have to face difficulties for journeys to and from the eastern side of the railway station and vice versa. But can a sane man, with his full knowledge as to the limited Government resources, support such a suggestion for shifting the railway station further to another site? Certainly not, specially in view of the fact that our fiscal activities are

much dependent upon external aid. Therefore, the alternative is to construct as many over-bridges and subways as possible because the public inconvenience of facing traffic jam here and there in the city almost always is a chronic problem and needs effective and permanent solution.

Another crucial problem is using strategic roads by different political parties for holding public meetings causing positive road blockade and consequent traffic hazards. It is really unfortunate for a free and sovereign country, more so when it has assumed democratic character, to allow such a thing curbing the people's civic rights. The Government may kindly take effective steps so that in no part of the city at any time there should be such road blockade. Three or four suitable venues should be selected to enable political parties to hold their meetings which will permanently curb

the need for road blockade for the purpose.

The erstwhile JP Government declared some important roads to be VIP ones debarring entry of rickshaws on such roads and such a step was unwholesome in as much as common man had difficulty to use the cheaper mode of conveyance for journeys to places touching such roads. My humble suggestion is that every road should have specific track for slow moving transports with strict orders that they would not encroach upon the road except for alighting or boarding passengers. Once such road discipline is established and rigidly enforced, the congestion here and there is bound to ease.

M Ibne Qas
Motiheel C/A, Dhaka

Bosnia-Herzegovina

Sir, We have no word to condemn those who are mercilessly killing innocent

Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina. We cannot even think that such brutality can be committed by any quarter in this civilized world.

We would strongly call upon the various nations of the world to unitedly resist killing of Muslims and others in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

It is encouraging to note that President Bush of the United States has recently announced his country's readiness to use force to assist humanitarian relief efforts in Bosnia-Herzegovina. We sincerely hope that the United Nations will make effective use of the US offer in stopping killings and violation of human rights in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Let OIC also adopt their own programme to save the lives of Muslims there.

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