Dhaka, Sunday, September 13, 1992

New signals between Syria and Israel

After four decades of hostility, Syria and Israel have started taking cautious steps towards reaching an understanding that may eventually lead to the signing of a peace treaty between the two long-time adversaries. This welcome development stems directly from the victory of the Labour Party in the Israeli election just two months ago, with Yitzhak Rabin taking over as the Prime Minister in Tel Aviv.

For the thaw in the relations between the two countries, credit does not go to Rabin alone. Some hopeful signals have also been coming from President Hafez Assad of Syria for sometime past, some say, even before the victory of the Labour in Israeli polls. Like Rabin, Assad must have realised that the status quo cannot last for ever and that with the Arab bloc deprived of the support of Moscow and the anti-Israeli forces divided on the question of Iraq, another Middle East war would be unthinkable, if not total madness. It is obvious that Iraq would welcome another Arab-Israeli war, in which it would most certainly take a leading role, and thus cause a diversion from the quagmire it is in.

In the ultimate analysis, it is the change of government in Tel Aviv that has altered the scenario. followed by the acceptance of the UN Security Council's resolution No 242 by Rabin. In effect, this means that the Israeli leader accepts the principle, "Territory for Peace" which his rightwing predecessors had turned down. In this context, one must commend the forthright forward-

looking approach of Rabin. However, one must not underestimate the difficulties which lie ahead as the two countries begin their search for peace. The immediate issue relates to the return of the Golan Heights, the Syrian territory, which Israel had seized during the 1967 war. Here, Syria's position is, it should get back the entire area, not just a portion of it as hinted by Rabin, if Damascus and Tel Aviv are to sign a peace treaty. Again, each side has its problems in dealing with its own popular opinion. Spokesmen for some of the 13,000 Jewish settlers in the Golan Heights have been already talking about staging protests against Rabin's gov-ernment if it should return the territory or even a part of it to Syria. Again, anti-Rabin forces in Tel Aviv are waiting to weaken the Labour administration either through a wave of popular demonstrations or by wooing away the government's coalition partners. The Rabin government must, therefore, move cautiously in deciding on its course of action.

There should be no illusion in Tel Aviv that a peace treaty signed with Damascus will bring the Arab-Israel conflict to an end. The treaty would certainly improve the climate for the continuing peace talks, but it won't produce a miracle. The feelings are strong in Arab circles that the limited self-rule offered by Rabin to the occupied territory does not go far enough in meeting the Palestinian position. The Arabs may not be immediately pressing for the settlement of the status of Jerusalem or, for that matter, for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon. But, sooner or later, Rabin will have to face these issues too. What is not in doubt, a peace treaty signed between Israel and Syria would put a new lease of life in the peace process.

Gender Oppression

Violence has for long been capturing the headlines as well as the large among whatever happen in a day or week or month - both nationally and locally. A close second to that is gender oppression. And it is common knowledge that of the violent crimes perpetrated all over the nation women bear the brunt of being the most victims.

As if by way of responding to such developments some newspapers are clustering gender oppression news into a box - assuming correctly enough that such reports have unfailing reader appeal - making compelling reading because of the revulsion the violence invokes — and the reader as indeed the viewer of such events and visual records of those are attracted to such as the insects are by bright light — and, on top of it, it titillates the prurient in us all. But all told this helps give us a picture of woman's place in the man's world in Bangladesh where the male gender's performance has been pushing the state of our people down the ladder of quality of life reading consistently for tens of decades.

Let us take such a box of news published in a national vernacular daily. The lead item is headlined - divorces on increase in Tangail. A survey has put the number at more than 17 thousand over three years. But the figure is qualified by two qualifications. One, it is impossible to get at the exact number as the poor couples who form the vast majority - do not register either their unions or their dissolutions. The other qualification is but axiomatic. Almost all of these divorces are forced by men on women. A woman cannot divorce her spouse, according as religion is practised till today. And socially also it is almost impossible.

It is interesting that there are, apart from another four in the box, four more reports in the same page, but outside box. In Meherpur 270 destitute women have lost their job with the Union Parishad's - due to the failure of UPs to comply in time with some formalities.

In Gopalgani 16 year-old Kanchanrani has committed suicide frustrated by her parents' endless quarrelling. In Kushtia sweeper Shahnoor Begum has sued a sub-divisional engineer for cheating and debauchery and rape. In view of the grimness of the above cases shall we call the sentencing of three traffickers in women to 10 years' jail term a silver lining? The charge against the

convicts was women oppression. The whole society is suffering from women oppression. Men included, when one's daughter is raped and someone else's wife kidnapped, one cannot but be oppressed. Which judge will punish the society for this? This is all perhaps also a kind of labour pain - a price being paid by women - as also the whole society - for the female sex coming out of their social strait-jacket and forcing their way into some recognition as a human being, as an individual. But they, Taslima Nasreen included, must understand that in our country more than three-fourths of the male sex are also leading a life devoid of recognition as an individual and a human being - not to speak of being a citizen. No wonder, they act more as predators on women rather than spouses and brothers and sons and fathers.

Let's Welcome the Summit's Signal of Interest in SAARC

URING their one-day conference in Karacht last week, opposition leaders from five of seven countries in South Asia talked a lot of sense.

The countries - Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal and the host Pakistan - are all founder-members of SAARC. The absentees were Bhutan and the Maldives which, sadly enough, are without any formal opposition parties.

The call issued on Wednesday, at the end of the meeting, covered a fairly wide ground, several popular issues and a few relatively new

As expected, the declaration called for political solutions of the outstanding issues among the countries in the region, the impartiality of the head of state which is an essential element in parliamentary democracy - an obvious reference to the situation in Bangladesh and Pakistan - and an access to vital information on national issues for opposition parties. based on "tolerance and mutual respect" between ruling parties and their critics inside the legislature. It was also agreed, another popular issue, that elections be conducted in each country by an "independent commission" free from administrative interference

Two relatively new issues were brought up, issues which may evoke mixed feelings among experts. In one, the meeting suggested that the state should provide financial resources to all "major" political parties "in order to fund their policy planning, research and training of political workers." The other one asked for a regional review of electoral arrangements to ensure that elections are free and fair in SAARC countries.

Notwithstanding the reaction of govern ments to the call to states to fund major parties, one hopes that political groupings will not keep their policy planning or training of their workers - two most neglected areas in most SAARC countries - in abeyance until financial assistance is available from the states.

It was during their speeches at the conference that the opposition leaders were positive and most constructive, judging by press reports and a couple of phone calls from Karachi.

Here, their views ranged from Sheikh Hasina's suggestion that the SAARC opposition forum should "complement" the efforts of the official body as well as of governments in different countries to the forthright position

Here is an opportunity to broaden the involvement of the seven-nation alliance and move towards creating a consultative council which one day

can pave the way for a SAARC Parliament. Meanwhile, let there be more interaction among leaders, like what we saw in Karachi, to defuse tension among nations in this volatile region.

taken by India's VP Singh to reduce the arms race between New Delhi and Islamabad to divert funds for development. In between these opinions, one can place the view of the Nepalese opposition leader Manmohon Adhikari that the whole of South Asia should become a zone for development", the plea from Anura Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka to regard "volatile ethnic issues" as a threat to democracy and the position of host Benazir Bhutto that South Asian countries should take many steps, including resolution of outstanding disputes, before SAARC could go for such an

ambitious project as the Common Market. There were, of course, lapses, deliberate or otherwise, an unfortunate one being the omission of the name of the late President Ziaur

If this is so, what happens — or rather should happen - next?

The Karachi declaration said that the leaders would meet periodically and exchange information on a regular basis 'about the role of the opposition and the impediments to democratic dispensation in SAARC countries."

It is a good thing that the Summit stopped short of setting up a permanent body or mechanism for this purpose. Any move to put the Karachi meeting in an institutional framework would have caused undue suspicion among various governments and put the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu in an awkward position.

By eschewing a negative or an aggressive posture, the opposition leaders have, in effect, put the ball in the court of the SAARC secre-

On the other hand, the interest shown in SAARC by opposition leaders should give the alliance's secretariat or even to the Organising Committee for the December summit an opportunity to broaden the area of SAARC's involvement. If leaders of major opposition parties are ready with suggestions for the alliance, there are no reasons why select groups of parliamentarians, belonging to all different parties, should not be brought on to the scene. What may be all the more important is to give the private sector a stronger voice than it has today in reviewing the work of SAARC on a regular basis, even in formulating its projects. The same should be true about the involvement of the media in promoting SAARC, eitherthrough a news exchange programme as suggested by Indian columnist Kuldip Nayar or by bringing out a regional journal, an idea offered by Sri Lankan journalist Tarzie Vittachi.

If SAARC can move in this direction, it will be indeed ahead of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), in some selected

When these steps produce satisfactory results. SAARC may well be preparing the ground for the establishment of a seven-nation Consultative Council, one that, in years to come, may well pave the way for the setting up of a SAARC Parliament.

At this moment, the idea of such a parliament may seem hopelessly premature, like the proposition for a SAARC Common Market or even a customs union. But, then, not very long ago, the proposal for the setting up of SAARC itself had seemed an impossible one. But it became a reality

The Karachi Summit of opposition leaders has thus opened up some unique possibilities, not only for the SAARC as an alliance, but also for mutual co-operation among South Asian countries. When VP Singh could publicly criticise the heavy arms purchases by India and when Sheikh Hasina could ask Pakistan to settle the question of the division of assets with Bangladesh, we could see clearly how much interaction was possible among leaders who influence policies of their countries, even without being in power. In the process, they may play a role in defusing tension among nations in this volatile region through their unscheduled regular periodic exchanges - and one day, hopefully, through the deliberation at a SAARC Parliament.

HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

Rahman from the list of Sheikh Hasina of assassinated leaders of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Going by the agency report, the Awami League leader brought up this list by way of making a passing plea for the repeal of the Indemnity Bill. As she put it, 'The failure to award retribution to the perpetrators of such crimes (assassinations) is never viewed as acts of mercy or compassion."

Such lapses few in number, did not mar the constructive tone of the Karachi meeting.

Here, one is tempted to wonder whether being away from the stresses and strains of their domestic politics, even for less than three days, these opposition leaders could see their roles, individually and collectively, from a different perspective, in a more positive light.

tariat and at the same time, offered governments in South Asia an opportunity to recognise the importance of the Karachi Summit. through some kind of action. In this respect, the role of the Government of Bangladesh which hosts the next SAARC Summit assumes special significance.

To start with, the grouping's secretariat and governments concerned should be pleased with the commitment the opposition leaders have made to SAARC, with suggestions as to what the alliance should do to reduce poverty and hunger from countries in South Asia. There should be no attempt on the part of any government to play down the importance of this commitment or to treat it as a political

Mass Killing of Officers Raises Sri Lanka Tension

NCALCULABLE political consequences could flow from the landmine killof General Denzil Kobbekadwe, commander of the Northern sector, and nine other top-ranking officers of the security forces in the

The killings have made the security forces restive. The possibility of an uprising has led to fears of serious law and order problems for the government of President Ranasinghe Premadasa.

strife-torn North of Sri Lanka.

Blame for the killings has been put on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which has been waging war for a decade to establish a Tamil

A repetition of the 1983 holocaust, in which thousands of Tamils living in the midst of the Sinhalese in the South were killed, cannot be ruled out. On that occasion the killing of 13 Sinhalese soldiers in the North, again by landmine, set the country aslame.

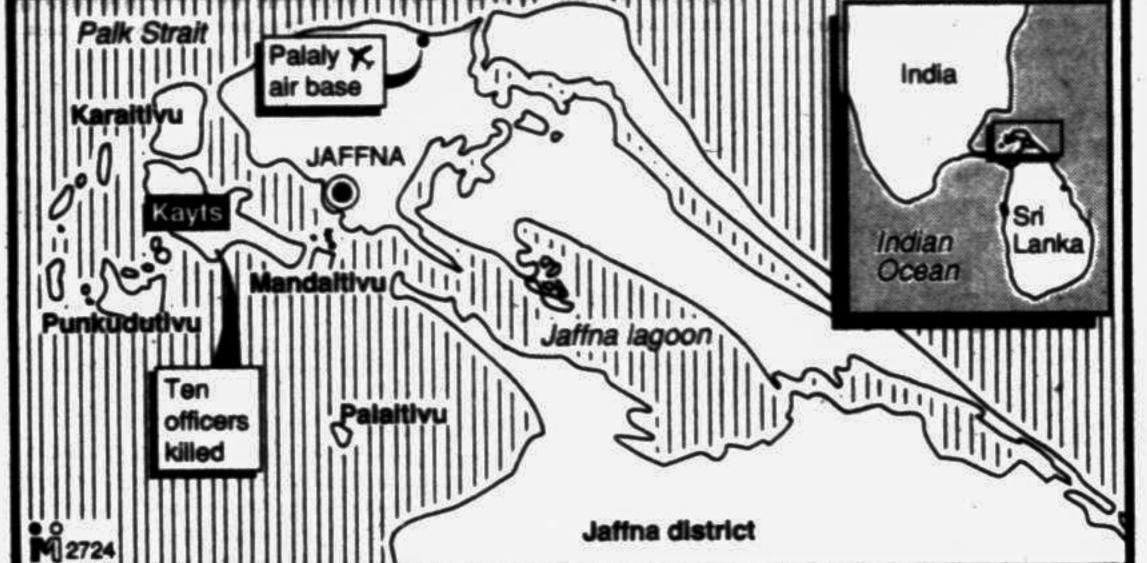
Kobbekadwe, who was 52, was a fearless commander who led his soldiers from the front unlike some commanders who gave orders from Colombo and never went into the battle areas. He had led the operation against the LTTE in its stronghold of Vadamarachchi in Jassna peninsula in 1987 when India intervened.

The latest explosion happened on the island of Kayts, a few miles from the northern capital of Jaffna. Kayts and eleven other islands were wrested from the LTTE by the security forces in 1990.

Kobbekadwe and his team were returning from an inspection tour. The mine, supGamini Navaratne writes from Colombo

The death by landmine of ten top officers, including the commander of the Northern sector where the Tamil war still rages, has raised the political temperature again in Sri Lanka. An army uprising is feared. There is no military solution to the ethnic war. Yet a political one seems as far away as ever.

Sri Lanka: Jaffna peninsula



posedly planted two years ago, blew up when it was hit by their vehicle. Strangely, trucks and vans had been using the same route for two years without anything happening.

The official version is that the vehicle, a long-wheelbase Land Rover, was of a heavier weight and so triggered off the bomb. But some people suspect that a bomb may have been planted in the vehicle to

kill Kobbekadwe, who was a relation of former prime minister Sirima Bandaranaike, leader of the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

He was thought to be getting too popular in the army and therefore beginning to present a possible threat to President Premadasa himself.

White flags flew over houses and office buildings in Colombo and 100,000 turned up for the

funeral, but Premadasa was not among them. He was at some building ceremonies 80 miles away. Fighting resumed in the North in 1990 after talks between the government and the LTTE broke down, ending 14 months of peace. Since then more than 3,000 Sinhalese soldiers have been casualties. Worst affected have been the uncounted thousands of Tamil civilians caught in crossfire.

The city of Jaffna has been heavily bombed by the air force, causing immense damage to life and property. The LTTE remains unbowed. Its leaders, 38-year-old Velupillai Prabhakaran, says he will settle for nothing less than a separate state to be named Eelam. Jaffna is the heartland of

the Tamil minority. Repeated appeals to surrender have always been spurned. The Indian intervention in 1987, ostensibly to prevent the "genocide" of the Tamils at the hands of the Sinhalese majority, ended in fiasco. The Tigers killed about 1,500 Indian soldiers and wounded double the number. In 1989 the Indians with-

Since then the security forces have made little headway. The spirit of national liberation is too strongly entrenched among the Tamils, especially the youth.

The Tiger objective now is to knock out the Palaly air force base at the extreme north of the Jassna peninsula. From there helicopter gunships fly daily to pound Tiger camps. A few months ago they had approached to within two

The government deployed thousands of extra troops to push back the Tiger encampments as far as possible from Palely. After heavy fighting the perimeter was established at six miles. If the security forces cap-

ture Jaffna the Tiger movement will be doomed. India has said it will not intervene

The Tigers are in a quandary. In May India outlawed the LTTE following the assassination of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. LTTE supply lines from the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu have largely been cut off.

Worse for the Tigers, Prabhakaran and 40 of his associates have been charged by a special court in Madras in connection with the assassination of Gandhi.

Premadasa has refused extradition of Prabhakaran on the ground that it would violate Sri Lanka's sovereignty, but in any case, with all his security forces, he has not been able to catch the Tamil leader anyway.

There is no military solution to the country's ethnic problems. It has to be political.

The government is spending Rs 15,000 billion on the war - 15 per cent of the national budget. the LTTE seems to have the resources to carry on and foreign collusion cannot be ruled out.

United Nations intervention seems to hold out the only hope of reconciling the Sinhalese and the Tamils, but today the world body has so many problems, it is hardly likely to have time to sip tea from this tiny, stormy island - GEMINI NEWS

GAMINI NAVARATNE is a senior Sri Lankan journalist and Editor of Sandesh News Agency in Colombo.

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.

Hasan Shahid Suhrawardy

Sir, I join you to thank Dr Anisuzzaman for his illuminating biographical sketch of famous scholar Hasan Shahid Suhrawardy, but I am inclined to disagree with you that your "My World" lacks a sense of direction (28.8.92). Your freewheel write-as-you-like style has, indeed, paid many dividends, Dr Anisuzzaman's wonderful contribution being, perhaps, the finest one. Hats off to both of you for initiating such an uplifting and highly intellectual exercise, which, I am sure, will not go in vain. After all, ours is an independent and sovereign nation, achieved through supreme sacrifices, and certainly not without any future prospect, despite the fact that it is going through many trials and errors and moments of extreme despair. I heard the name of scholar Hasan Shahid Suhrawardy from

my two senior colleagues, alas

now dead - poet Abdul Quadtr

and publicist Anwar Hossain. But Dr Anisuzzaman's digging from the hoary past has thrown fresh lights on the life and achievement of one of our past luminaries. It has made us proud of the great scholar whose fame transcended geographical, linguistic and sectarian boundaries.

Succeeding great painter Abanindra Nath Tagore as the Professor of Fine Arts in Calcutta University, or becoming an Art Director at the Moscow Art Theatre, or a visiting Professor of Oriental Arts at the Colombia University are matters of great pride not only for the scholar but also for all of his admirers. Incidentally, I would like to point out that 'scholar' Suhrawardy and 'statesman' (not 'politician' as Dr Anisuzzaman has, perhaps, inadvertently mentioned) were equally brilliant and famous in their own fields. This correspondent had the privilege of hearing 'statesman' Suhrawardy in pin-drop silence at the S

M Hall auditorium, possibly in

Jawaharlal Nehru for his Kashmir policy, for more than an hour even without once mentioning his name. Abdul Kader, Purana Paltan, Dhaka

1956, when he, as the prime

minister of Pakistan ridiculed

Monetary loss and its recovery

Sir, in all banks, post offices, and other places where cash is handled continuously, cheques and demand drafts are passed throughout the day, the concerned officials/officers bear great responsibilities in comparison with officials who do not bear such responsibilities. Pay in both the cases is about the same.

Fraudulent transactions can take place due to the various degree of negligence/ carelessness of an official, though his honesty and integrity is not doubted after thorough investigations by the department and the police. In such cases, heavy financial recoveries are made from the negligent (but by no means corrupt) officials with crippling effects.

An official who is found negligent in his work/duties may be given any of the statutory punishments, including removal from service. In my experience, I have seen disastrous results, when one-third of the pay of an official is deducted each month, for a period of one to three years. At other times the official has to sell out/mortgage his properties to make an immediate

lump sum payment. The above issue calls for our careful examination. Shahabuddin Mahtab Dhanmondi

Dispelling mental agonies

Dhaka

Sir, The mental state of affairs has always been in constant flux. Perhaps, none in the world enjoys continued peace or suffers from continued unrest. We tend to think that some others are better than us, which is a quite wrong perception. In fact, everyone is surrounded by some problems. the degree and intensity of those problems, consequentially, are determined by the position he holds in the society. Thus the higher the position one holds, the bigger the

problem he faces. In this backdrop, one should better take any problem normally. Being a member of the society, everyone has to confront such problems. One cannot transcend the society. but must come to terms with the problems prevalent there.

Again, facing any problem, one could think that since the state of affairs is in constant

flux, that would not last long. Soon the tension would get diffused. Thus, we can lessen

Md Abdur Rouf Sergeant, Zahurul Haque Hall, DU

our agonies.

Shah Jalal University

Sir, The Shah Jalal University of Science and Technology in Sylhet had started functioning little more than a year ago. But till now only a few subjects have been opened. Even such common subjects as Botany, Zoology, Applied Physics, Pharmacy, Geography etc. have not been opened as yet. Since it is a University of Science and Technology, an Engineering faculty is a must. But no engineering subject has been opened as yet. As a result, practically, it is not as much a University, rather an apology for University.

Meagre fund allocation by the Education Ministry and the Planning Commission is said to be the stumbling block in the way of development of the University. Hence it is felt that either adequate fund should be alloted by the Government to the University to run it like a proper University or it should be closed down completely. Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury Dhaka Cantonment

Saplings need care

Sir, Presently the tree plan-

tation, programme, believably, is going on in full swing throughout the country. Plants can effectively contribute in providing a pollution-free, clean and healthy environ-

Meanwhile, the newly planted saplings need proper nursing and protection for their natural growth. Hence the newly planted saplings should be properly fenced by bamboo or brick fencing. At this end, the Bangladesh Society for Conservation of Environment (BSCE) has undertaken appropriate programmes to ensure full protection and proper nursing of the saplings recently planted by its members during BSCE's tree-plantation day at Sir Salimullah Medical College premises.

The BSCE would like to request everyone to take proper care of the newly planted saplings so that they can grow to matured trees and serve the purposes for which they are being planted.

M Zahidul Haque Publicity and Press Secretary. BSCE, Dhaka

