

BCC: Time to Act

Two inter-related issues appear to have been raised by a United States Senate sub-committee's report, published Sunday, on the Bangladesh operation of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI). First is the embezzlement of state funds and illegal transfer of foreign currency by former president Hussain Muhammad Ershad, and BCC Bangladesh's role in it; and secondly, the fraudulent and criminal activities in which the BCC management in Dhaka had, the report alleged, been involved. Allegations of tax-fraud, huge pay-offs to political leaders, and smuggling of millions of dollars etc. have surprised few, and demand immediate attention.

With such a damning piece of allegation before us, the question naturally is: what now? The answer, quite simply, is this: the government has to act, swiftly and without ambiguity. The Senate revelations are disturbing, because the government has been in control of BCC Bangladesh since July 6, 1991. On that day, the bank was suspended on request from its parent body in Abu Dhabi, and all documents and account papers in BCC branches were seized by the government's auditors. Yet, for the past 15 months, we have heard nothing about the alleged criminal activities of BCC officials. We have no doubt that the auditors did a thorough job, but that begs the question why no legal action has yet been put into motion by either Bangladesh Bank or the finance ministry. After all, even if a fraction of the accusations contained in the Kerry sub-committee report could be backed by evidence admissible in a court of law, then there would be plenty of bonafide reasons for taking tough legal measures.

Finance Minister Saifur Rahman has certainly done a good job by re-floating the bank under new ownership. By all accounts, depositors of former BCC are satisfied with the arrangements of the Eastern Bank Limited, and we can consider that chapter to be closed, with interests of those affected having been looked after as much as was possible under the circumstances. But what we cannot consider closed is the issue of criminality that may have been involved in BCC's operations in Bangladesh prior to July 6, 1991. For one thing, if such activities are allowed to go without legal redress, even after the revelations in Washington, then that would send a wholly wrong signal to the financial market. Rahman needs to prevent such a signal from being sent, for the sake of the rule of law, and honesty and discipline in the financial world. The finance ministry must be privy to a great deal of information about BCC's dealings, and unless those information are made public and legal actions taken against former officials, then too many questions will remain unanswered which would not be conducive to the healthy growth of private sector banking in this country.

Those that We are Blind to

What are they blind to? Nothing, for here is a lot that easily should be counted among the most caring of humans in a world that has suddenly forgotten to accommodate and to be considerate. And this is also the big group of men and women and children that the society is, by and large, blind to. We are speaking of the blind — the lakhs of them that are languishing in this country in the disadvantages of their condition — whom we should long have started calling the 'sightless' and not blind.

On Saturday, the sightless held a massive demonstration in the metropolitan city, pressing for the implementation of a charter of 16 demands. Most of these demands warrant serious attention and some of these are worth acting upon without delay although within the means available to government. While we are on this point, let us have it clear that all of the demands are addressed to the government and are so designed as to be taken care of by the government alone and no one besides. We write to sympathise with the demands and with much more that the sightless people are in need of. At the same time we must say to our handicapped citizens that their biggest hurdles to a fair deal from society is the place the society accords them — a regular dump of a place, that is. No amount of demonstrations on the streets and government concessions can effect a change in their social position. A number of very high achieving sightless persons together with those few among the 'sighted' ones who have the right vision of the society can work for correcting the social malaise of discriminating against the disadvantaged.

More jobs to the sightless can be a way of proving to society that they are as useful as citizens or members of the family as others are. But before that facilities should be created for teaching the sightless in skills and trades that they may find easy to cope with and even excel in. From music to basketry to sculpture — there is a good range of jobs just awaiting the sightless ones' arrival.

The above should presuppose a quantum of education for all sightless people. But the cause of education for the sightless has been such a subject of neglect that there doesn't exist in the land any home-grown literature or even a magazine or news bulletin in Braille. In this highly non-literate society let it be the sightless people's prerogative to be educated universally — for that's about the only way they can overcome their blindness.

The sightless are particularly good at receiving storing and putting to use audio signals. Let all adult ones among them get a transistor radio receiving set at a goodly discount and let no licence fee be charged for the set.

Blindness occurs more in the lower perches in the society. Unchallenged this only widens the chasm between the classes. If this affliction would not move along the poverty divide, things would have been far more manageable for the sightless. It is because the sightless are also mostly poor, that they need the society's most attention.

As the horror of Tamil Tigers declines, the first thing that comes to the minds of Indians is the fate of the 'accord' that the late prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and former president JR Jayawar

dene signed nearly five years ago. This was supposed to devolve power to the Tamils in Jaffna, northern Sri Lanka. The process continues to be wrapped in an enigma even after President Premadasa's visit to India.

True, the 'accord' has been incorporated in the Sri Lankan constitution as the 13th amendment. In a way, northern and eastern provinces have been joined together into a single administrative unit. Even provincial councils, so to say, have been set up for transfer of power. But everything is so ad hoc, so nebulous and so ephemeral that there is very little substance in what has been done.

It was Premadasa who dismissed Varadaraja Perumal in the north and there has been no successor since. The council, if at all in existence, is animated suspension. And there is no sign of referendum in the eastern province to determine whether the mixed population of Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims support its merger with the northern province into a single Tamil-dominated province.

Except for Tamil becoming official language, the 'accord' remains on paper. Premadasa's assurance to New Delhi may prove to be as much an eye-wash as Jayawardene's statement that the 'accord' has been implemented. In reality, there is nothing on the ground.

Delhi-Colombo Accord May still Resolve the Tamil Problem

The writer recently paid a visit to Colombo

Sri Lanka is the only neighbouring country with which India has no territorial, water or such dispute. It is the treatment meted out to the Tamils that has come between the two because of the respondent chord it has touched in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere. At present, even that sort of reaction is more or less absent. The violence committed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has left India cold. Whatever sympathy was there, it has been squeezed out by Rajiv Gandhi's assassination.

But that does not mean the situation cannot change. Anything can disturb the calm water at any time. Much will depend on the turn of politics in Tamil Nadu. If there is no improvement in the status of the Tamils in Lanka, the continuing military action by Colombo can start a backlash.

A limited stir is already visible in a few coastal areas of Tamil Nadu. The Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), led by S Ramadoss, has been able to evoke favourable response on the banning of the LTTE in India. Former Tamil Nadu chief minister K Karunanidhi echoes the feelings of a preponderant number of Tamils when he says: "We have no sympathy for the militants but this does not mean that we have no sympathy for the Sri Lankan Tamils."

No doubt, New Delhi's own track record has not been clean. During the days of Mrs Indira Gandhi's foolish poli-

tics, it made the LTTE into a Frankenstein so as to threaten Sri Lanka with cessation if it did not come to terms with the Tamils. Even Colombo's sovereignty was scoffed at when India airdropped food and medical supplies on Jaffna, which the Sri Lankan forces had blocked to combat the LTTE insurgency.

But New Delhi has learnt the lesson. It will not commit the same mistake again. When JN Dixit, then India's High Commissioner in Colombo, gave an ultimatum to Sri Lanka itself. Since then, it has smashed the LTTE's hideouts in Tamil Nadu from where it used to operate.

New Delhi now scrupulously avoids any direct or indirect contact with the LTTE. Kittu, deputy to V Prabhakaran, the LTTE chief, has been trying for a meeting with the representatives of the Indian government to clear, what the LTTE has described as a 'misunderstanding'. But India's reply has been a firm no.

This may still not undo the wrong New Delhi has done. But

Tamil Tigers, who kept the IPKF at bay, are so well armed and trained in guerrilla warfare that their annihilation is possible only by cutting off their support at the base. A contented Tamil community will do so and see to it that they do not get shelter or sympathy.

Colombo's own strategy has been to chastise the LTTE to such an extent that it is forced to come to the negotiating table. Purpose of punishing the LTTE was to persuade it to come to a settlement. General AS Attygalle, the Sri Lanka High Commissioner in London used to tell me when I was India's High Commissioner to the UK that "there has to be a political solution to the problem, not a military one". He was at one time associated with talks with the Tamil militants. He said he could reach nowhere because the younger lot among the militants was not under the control of the leaders who, even when they agreed to something, found it difficult to implement.

To blame the LTTE for sabotaging the 'accord' is however, to look for a facile explanation. The Tamil Tigers were never serious about the 'accord'. They led Rajiv Gandhi up to the garden path because they wanted to draw the maximum benefits from him. By the time he saw through the game, a lot of damage had been done.

It must also be said that Jayawardene played many games. He could have effected

a solution on lesser terms long ago if he had been serious about devolving power. He said several things to several people at the same time. Also he cannot be totally absolved of government's connivance during the 1987 ethnic riots.

His request to New Delhi to send its forces came only when he realised that he could not tackle the LTTE on his own, which was then operating freely from the Indian soil. He reportedly approached America, Britain and some other powers for military assistance but drew a blank. Only then did he turn to India, which swallowed the bait to prove its ascendancy in the region.

Perhaps the 'accord' cannot be retrieved in its original shape. Maybe the merger of northern and eastern provinces will be difficult to hold. The primary objective is not to integrate the territories but to bring about emotional integration between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. Whichever formula can do so, it should be good enough.

Now that Premadasa has won the petition, challenging his election as president, he should feel secure enough to pursue a solution to the Tamil problem. When I was in Colombo recently, I found a sea-change in the attitude of the Sinhalese, who increasingly feel that the Tamils should be accommodated. This is a plus point. Premadasa has only to take the initiative and he will find that a silent majority is in favour of retrieving the Tamils.

He should pick up the thread from where Jayawardene left it off. But if the situation is allowed to smoulder, New Delhi may be sucked into it without its wanting to do so.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

that India would not allow the military to take over Jaffna, it behaved haughtily. Many high commissioners to Sri Lanka have acted like viceroys and they have cultivated the impression that Colombo would be better off by looking towards New Delhi. But that phase is hopefully over.

New Delhi tried to make amends when it sent the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), which lost 1,500 men and Rs 1,000 crore, to fight the LTTE. To pacify Colombo's fears, it also incorporated military assistance in the 'accord'

this is no reason why Colombo should drag its feet on the 'accord'. The Tamils remain aggrieved minority. The LTTE is able to exploit them because they nourish the grievance that they are not getting their due. Colombo is not fighting a Sinhalese-Tamil way: it is fighting against the LTTE, which has challenged the country's integrity.

By all means, Sri Lanka should show no mercy to the LTTE. But a military solution, as it should have known by its experience, is not possible, definitely not lasting. The

Philippine Left Won't Veer from Socialist Road

IN September, the Philippine government sent a high-level team to the Netherlands to discuss peace talks with the National Democratic Front, the umbrella organisation of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed group, the New People's Army (NPA).

Depthnews correspondent Marites Sison-Paes faxed an exclusive interview with NDF Vice-Chairman Luis Jalandoni, a former Catholic priest. Below are his, and the NDF's answers.

Depthnews: Please comment on the government's peace offer. Why do you think did Philippine President Fidel V. Ramos initiate this move after being lukewarm to the peace talks then initiated by the previous Aquino government?

Luis Jalandoni: President Ramos is politically very unstable. He got only 23.5 per cent of the vote and is to deal with a factionalised Armed Forces. The economy is mired in an ever-deepening crisis.

Under these conditions, he has embarked on a massive media campaign for reconciliation and peace. Until the exploratory talks in the Hague, his position of demanding the surrender of the NDF, CPP and NPA and the use of the Philippine Constitution as the sole legal framework for peace negotiations had not changed. The stress of his so-called peace initiatives has been on amnesty, a vain inducement to surrender.

D: What does the NDF stand to gain by agreeing to another

round of peace negotiations, what factors were taken into consideration in arriving at this decision?

LJ: The NDF has the standing policy of seeking a just, enduring and liberating peace.

If President Ramos shows signs of a serious political will to address the root causes of the armed conflict, the NDF is willing to respond.

In the meantime, we have made it clear that the release of more than 600 political prisoners, a stop or deescalation of the total war policy, the repeal of oppressive laws giving justice to the teachers who went on a 143-day hunger strike, among others, are needed to improve the atmosphere for peace negotiations. These are demanded by the general public and numerous human rights organisations.

Another significant factor has been the growing clamour, in the Philippines and abroad, for serious peace negotiations.

D: Wasn't there any debate about the soundness of entering into talks which already failed the first time?

LJ: Indeed, there were some in the revolutionary movement who pointed out that President Ramos, as Armed Forces Chief of Staff in 1986-87 had sabotaged the peace negotiations and thereafter had blocked peace talks by his intransigent precondition of surrender and they contended that it would be a waste of effort to meet with President Ramos' emissary.

However, a consensus did emerge that, considering new factors such as President Ramos' political instability and the proven incapacity of the AFP to defeat the NDF, CPP and NPA, it is appropriate to 'take the step of going into

The National Democratic front is ready to go into a political settlement that addresses the roots of the civil war. But it will not agree to a surrender of its principles, its weapons and the revolutionary gains of over 23 years of struggle'

new official exploratory talks.

D: Do you think President Ramos has the military support for the peace talks denied to the previous Aquino government? Is the situation the same or have conditions changed?

LJ: Being a former military man, with unquestioned right-wing credentials, president Ramos would be less vulnerable to being accused of being soft to the revolutionary movement. But he has been unable to achieve reconciliation with military rebels and it is known that he lost the vote in the military camps.

D: The 1986 talks also failed because the two sides could not agree on the framework. Are we back to the same problem?

LJ: At the exploratory talks in The Hague, both sides came out with a joint declaration which recommends that peace negotiations be held according to mutually acceptable principles including national sovereignty, democracy and social justice and that no precondition shall be imposed to negate the inherent character and purpose of peace negotiations.

If approved by President Ramos and NDF Chairman Manuel Romero, this recommendation will mean that neither the Constitution nor the NDF Constitution is insisted on as the sole legal framework, and the Precondition of sur-

render is no longer held on to.

D: What lessons did the political left learn from the failed talks?

LJ: The following are some of the major lessons from the failed talks in 1986-87.

a) A mutually acceptable legal framework must be agreed upon before the start of formal bilateral peace negotiations. The insistence of the government on the Constitution as the sole legal framework rendered the peace negotiations impossible.

b) A mutually agreed upon substantive agenda has to be worked out prior to the formal talks. The insistence of the government panel then to limit the agenda to national reconciliation and rehabilitation and amnesty, which is nothing but a surrender agenda, was a major factor in causing the collapse of the talks.

c) A neutral foreign venue is needed. Holding the talks in Manila, where government power is concentrated, renders neutrality of venue untenable. Nor is it allowable to hold it in the guerrilla fronts of the NDF/CPP/NPA, since the mass organisations and areas would be exposed and subject to AFP attack.

During the 1986-87 peace talks, the AFP took undue advantage of the surfacing of underground personnel of the revolutionary movement for

the peace talks, putting these under surveillance, and thereby significantly increasing their 'intelligence stocks'.

Moreover, the government has in practice gone to Tripoli in 1976 to sign an agreement with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and again sent an emissary to Saudi Arabia in 1987 to hold talks with the MNLF. It is also well known that peace negotiations to resolve armed conflicts in different parts of the world have been held in foreign venues.

D: Are the prospects for 'lasting peace' brighter this time? What about a ceasefire?

LJ: We have to await the decision of President Ramos and his subsequent steps. In the meantime, the revolutionary forces uphold their principles and programmes and maintain their vigilance.

A ceasefire would be appropriate only when substantive agreements have been forged in the negotiations. Before that, the NDF remains willing to have ceasefires for humanitarian reasons for a limited time, for example, to allow medical personnel to cross battle lines, the release of prisoners, or during Christmas and New Year holidays.

D: Former Communist Party Secretary General Rafael Baylosis believes government is compelled to seek peace talks because there's a political and military standoff? Do you agree? Who has the upper hand now?

LJ: The AFP has failed in its objective to defeat the revolutionary movement by the end of Mrs Aquino's term. They have readjusted their objectives: 'strategic control' by the end of 1992 and 'strategic victory' by the end of 1993.

While the AFP remains militarily superior, capable of mounting huge military operations, it is divided into various factions and is alienated from the people due to its anti-people acts. On the contrary, the revolutionary forces have the wide support of the people, have high morale and discipline and are able to launch many widespread and intensive tactical offensives.

D: Where is the communist insurgency headed? There are reports that the ascendant view now is for the movement to 'go back to the basics', protracted guerrilla warfare in the countryside. Still, there are those who advocate urban uprising, while others want to enter in a 'political settlement' with government. What is the dominant view, and why?

LJ: The rich experience and gains of the revolutionary movement since the late 1960s, under the worst attacks of the Marcos dictatorship and the total war policy of Mrs Aquino, bear out the basic correctness of the strategy and tactics of the revolutionary movement.

The combination of various forms of armed and unarmed struggle, the intensification of the revolutionary mass movement, the carrying out of basic socio-economic and political reforms in our areas of control or influence, in accord with the theory of people's war applied creatively and in a living manner to Philippine conditions, these have been proven correct in practice.

The views of insurrectionism in an armed urban uprising and the view of political

settlement without firmly upholding principle and basic interests of the people are being rejected by the overwhelming majority of activists and members of the revolutionary movement.

The NDF has consistently declared its readiness to go into a comprehensive political settlement that adequately addresses the fundamental socio-economic and political problems that lie at the root of the raging civil war. But it will not agree to a surrender of its principles, its weapons, and the revolutionary gains of over 23 years of struggle.

D: Where does the political left stand now, ideologically?

LJ: The NDF is in the process of consolidating itself, summing up its experiences and learning valuable lessons. It is in the process of reaffirming its commitment to a socialist perspective. This means, a determination to build socialism after the attainment of national democracy. It reaffirms its rejection of the capitalist road and system, because under this system the Filipinos have experienced intolerable exploitation, oppression and misery.

D: Considering the adoption of free market policies in former communist governments, what are the prospects now for the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP)? Do you not see the danger of the CPP not winning the war, not losing it either but simply drifting along?

LJ: The CPP, NDF and NPA can learn valuable lessons from the difficulties, mistakes, as well as achievements in other countries. The concrete achievements of socialism over several decades that benefitted millions of people are as real as the deterioration that has led to the restoration of capitalism in former socialist countries.

The task remains for the CPP, NDF, and other forces committed to socialism, to learn deeply the lessons from other countries and build, according to Philippine conditions and specific characteristics, a viable socialist society in our country.

The danger of drifting along is firmly countered by an adequate programme of consolidation, including especially summing-up and systematic study, and a correct and decisive leadership closely integrated with the masses. Moreover, the revolutionary movement is building a people's government, the organs of democratic political power, in the countryside.

D: What are your personal plans? Do you see yourself availing of the amnesty programme?

LJ: My personal plan is to continue fulfilling the tasks assigned to me by the revolutionary movement. While we have not yet seen the concrete amnesty programme to be drafted by the National Unification Commission, I can state clearly now that we reject any amnesty that implies surrender or that can be used for paywar purposes of the Ramos administration.

D: Can you imagine yourself being active in local political processes?

LJ: That is a possibility but it surely is too far ahead to imagine since we are just at the exploratory phase of the peace negotiations.

To the Editor...

Review of promotions

Sir, Recently some officials have filed writ in High Court and suit in Administrative Appellate Tribunal against irregular promotions to the posts of Joint Secretary and Deputy Secretary a few months ago. A large number of senior officers with good service records were superseded for no fault of their own and there was scathing criticism on the subjects in the independent section of the press. In the backdrop of this, the honourable Prime Minister addressed the officials a few days after the promotion that case of supersession will be reviewed and there is no need for the affected ones to go to court.

After that, the affected persons met the Establishment Secretary and State Minister for Establishment a number of times and as time passed they gradually hardened their attitude. Then they were left with no alternative but to file writ in High Court and suit in Administrative Appellate Tribunal. After this, the government decided hurriedly to hold the interviews of the superseded officials by the council committee on the basis of the same principles which they followed earlier. It is alleged that the government is trying to promote those who filed suit to nullify the suit and as an eye-wash some more will be promoted. The matter is subjective and it is not under-

stood how at this stage government is trying to hold interview when the basic policy and principle of interview have been challenged by the petitioners in the High Court and the Administrative Tribunal.

Moreover, it has been proved beyond any doubt that promotion through this type of interview is not fair and impartial, where allegedly nepotism, favouritism and corruption play the key role. Hence the only just and fair basis for promotion is seniority, ACR and Dossiers. This system is followed everywhere except in case of Secretariat promotions. Holding of interview again by the same people in the same manner will only result in repetition of the same story. I also appeal to the honourable Supreme Court through this column to take cognizance of this grossly irregular system of promotion and put a permanent end to it.

Kabir Uddin Sarkar
Banani, Dhaka

Ashkona-Naddapara-Dakshin Khan Road

Sir, We demand an immediate inquiry into the long-standing negligence of WASA authorities in non-repairing and costly damages done to the newly-built Ashkona-Naddapara-Dakshin Khan Road that was constructed in April this year.

This road was constructed by LGEB after the local people's voluntary contribution in

earth work of Tk 32,000. Then LGEB came forward to construct it under the tutelage of local MP Quamrul Islam.

Just after completion of brick-laying, WASA dugged it to lay water pipes. But the repairing of the road after digging by WASA was not done intermittently due just to negligence, as apparent.

Already four months have elapsed, there is no sign of repairing the digged road by WASA, in spite of requests were made by the local leaders and people. Due to utter negligence the said road has become unusable even by richahaws at some places.

We demand an urgent inquiry into the matter and request the authorities concerned to do the needful at the earliest. We also demand that the culprits should be brought to justice and punitive measures taken for causing utter suffering to the people.

Vox populi

Patriotic songs

Sir, The term 'proper education' had been very tricky to define. There may be different definitions by different schools of thought. However, perhaps, all those schools would conform to the view that imparting truth has been a major criterion of proper education.

I very painfully feel that, I was perhaps taught some blatant lies at primary level. For instance, while in class one, a verse of my text-book read

'shakal desher shera sheje amar janamobhum' (my birth-land is the best of all countries). Again, 'emom deshe janomo niva amora garbo bodh kort' (We feel proud taking birth in such a country).

I was imbued with the ideas of such verses. I felt proud of my country—the best of all countries of the world.

But alas! I have now been mature enough to learn that neither my country is the best of all the countries of the world nor there has been any big reason to boast of. The deep-rooted conviction of my mind regarding my country has broken down.

In become angry with those who taught me these lies. Had I been taught the truth, I could have seen the real pictures of my country before long and also could have tried to arm myself to combat the vices bedeviling the country.

This relates to a large array of patriotic songs of ours. Most of those contain the sort of lies mentioned above. I feel that propagation of those lies is doing a grievous harm to our country.

I urge the composers of the patriotic songs to portray the real pictures of the country through patriotic songs and fervently request the authorities concerned not to impart lies to the youngsters.

Md Abdur Rouf
Sergeant Zahurul Haque Hall, DU