

The Shake-up in Japan

The call by a young Japanese military officer, Major Shinsaku Yanai, for an army coup in his country to clean up its politics of all financial scandals is unlikely to get any support from the military establishment. Major Yanai will most probably be disciplined by his superiors. Yet, his call which has been publicised by the country's largest circulation weekly magazine, the *Shukan Bunshun*, has "sent something of a chill through the government" as the media has put it, reminding the ruling party of a failed military coup that rocked Tokyo in the 1930s.

The plea by the young Major, presented in the form of an essay published by the weekly, reflects the wide-spread public anger and resentment evoked by circumstances surrounding the long-delayed resignation from the national parliament of Shin Kanemaru. Often described as the kingmaker in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, Kanemaru, 78, has admitted that he had accepted a massive illegal contribution from a businessman connected with organised crime. In resigning his seat in the Diet and quitting public life, Kanemaru offered public apology and confessed to his crime. All this was very Japanese, which, in normal circumstances, should have closed the chapter and the country would have returned to "business as usual" situation.

Unfortunately for the ruling party, the resignation by Kanemaru has not resolved the crisis. For one thing, the ageing kingmaker waited too long to step down until he was forced out by a national outpouring of disgust over disclosures of the financial scandals involving this veteran politician. While processions, marches and even hunger strikes took place in different parts of the country, a TV newscaster termed the situation as manifestation of "People's Power", an expression never used before in Japan.

No matter what the authorities do with Major Yanai, the ruling LDP cannot treat the Kanemaru affair just as another nasty episode, to be dealt with by renewed pledges for reforms in the party. Such pledges have come before, a few heads have rolled and some reforms, described by critics as cosmetic changes, have been put into effect. However, by and large, the party has remained the same. In fact, each new financial scandal turns out to be worse than the last one, with the public disenchantment reaching a higher level of frustration.

With the leading opposition Socialist Party too weak to provide an alternative to the ruling party, it is the LDP which must change from within. To start with, the discredited ageing leadership must show a genuine interest in bringing up the mid-level young LDP members to the top decision-making level, people who may not be as closely tied to big business as the power-brokers dominating the scene today. It is also obvious that that the hold of the massive Japanese trading corporations over the LDP stems from the ruling party's need for staggering finances to keep the organisation's machine well-oiled. Here, too, there is room for rethinking. In the ultimate analysis, the ruling party must undergo a thorough reorganisation based on a carefully-planned socio-economic agenda, if it is to avoid a split, an unexpected resurgence of the Socialist Party or even a highly improbable attempted, but a failed, coup by a group of army officers.

Too Tricky OP-1

The hunger strike by a number of winners of the OP-1 visa lottery arranged by the United States State Department last year, is a distressing piece of news and has no doubt placed the US embassy in Dhaka in a tricky position. The embassy cannot issue any visa against OP-1 because the State Department says all 20,000 visas allotted to winners of the lottery have been already issued; but some 750 Bangladeshi winners who have not been issued with visas maintain that this refusal is a clear breach of commitment on the part of the US government. The State Department further says that it had given early warning to the effect that victory in the lottery would not necessarily mean the issuance of a visa, but that still leaves the question as to why the hi-teach lottery produced more winners than the number of visas on offer unanswered.

Throughout the time of the build-up to final date of the lottery, the general impression in Bangladesh was that winners would get visas, no matter what their qualifications or language abilities were. The US embassy in Dhaka was undoubtedly aware of the impression under which so many thousands of people were collecting OP-1 forms. It is now clear that the situation, as explained by the State Department now, was not communicated effectively to the applicants. As a result, when 750 winners are denied visas, they feel let-down. Many of them had given up jobs, here and abroad, and sold whatever property they had, in preparation for their departure and raise the money necessary as "evidence of support" for their visa applications. Now they find themselves without a visa and the means for survival. Some, however, have got the idea that this represents a breach of their human rights, but that may be stretching it a little too far, since we are not certain under which international convention a government is duty-bound to issue immigration visas on the basis of a lottery, even if that government happened to say so in the first place. But we can say that the US government should take a more considerate view of the situation, since a serious misunderstanding resulting from a breakdown in communication may have been responsible for the anguish of the 750.

The US embassy in Dhaka could, on the one hand, lobby the State Department hard to persuade the authorities to treat the Bangladeshi 750 as special cases on a one-off basis, while making it abundantly clear to all, that in any future lottery, winning would in no way guarantee visas. An immigration visa to the US or anywhere else is not a right of a Bangladeshi, OP-1 or not, and nobody should try to make it sound as if it were. The hunger-strikers should realise that their best chances lie with appealing to the humanitarian clauses in the US Constitution and international conventions, rather than anything else. They ought to end their strike immediately, and seek some sort of assurance from the embassy that their cases would be considered favourably in the future.

Eradication of poverty is not only the most important goal for the nation but also the greatest challenge. I will not go into a discussion about the exact figure of our per capita income. It is so low that a debate on it is a depressing exercise.

In the Human Development Index prepared by the United Nations Development Programme, Bangladesh is placed in the unflattering 136th position. UNDP studied 160 countries and applied very sophisticated methods to determine the actual quality of life of the people. Despite the grandiose claims by succeeding regimes as well as the foreign aid received so far we are almost standing still.

Against the background of rapidly rising population we have such a low real GDP growth rate that I have been wondering whether, in such circumstances, it is possible to alleviate poverty on a significant scale. A stagnant economy such as the one we have today does not seem to be very favourable for poverty alleviation activities.

What was wrong in our development strategy? Not only the dynamic East and South East Asian countries but even the rest of the South Asian countries are poised to leave us behind. Notwithstanding recent pronouncements of the Finance Minister giving a rosy picture after his return from Washington, there are few indications that the economy is on the move. How long is he going to blame the fallen autocratic regime? Stagnation in investment, massive unemployment and generally lacklustre performance of the export sector is all too obvious to need any proof. How much of foreign investment has actually flowed into the country? I am most curious to see the actual figures of investment—both foreign and domestic. In fact, I wish one could get reliable information on the new investments made by the private sector which have actually materialized in the course of the last one and a half year.

The background is thus rather uninspiring for a serious attack on the massive poverty which has engulfed the nation.

Yet one cannot wait until the growth rate improves. I have been reflecting on the fine example of the Grameen Bank which is a bold and imaginative initiative for helping the poor. Prof Yunus has created an unique institution which is the pride of this country. He has demonstrated that the poor can also be credit-worthy. They can be mobilized and inspired to become self-reliant in seeking to get out of the poverty trap. The most important and to my mind, perhaps the most enduring gain from the Grameen Bank method is the spirit of self-reliance and sense of dignity that access to credit gives to the poor. Given our dependence as a nation on foreign aid, this spirit is certainly a most valuable gain for us. But while the Grameen Bank is a most worthwhile experiment in bringing about fundamental change in the life of millions of poor people, I wonder if this will be able to make a big dent in our massive poverty. The same can be said about the work of many other NGOs. Thousands of dedicated social workers are applying a variety of methods to improve the living standard of the poor. However, what has been the net outcome until now? Have we been able to make any significant impact in alleviating poverty?

Experience of Other Countries

Looking at the experience of other countries — especially those in East and South East Asia — I am convinced that while the Grameen Bank method is a most successful experiment in helping the poor by enabling them to help themselves, poverty eradication in Bangladesh today calls for far more than redistributing wealth within the rural communities. Substantial improvements in education, health, housing and above all, in employment and income

Eradication of Poverty: Is it a Losing Battle in Bangladesh?

can come only when the nation is on a dynamic growth mode. The economy must grow and expand. Investment is the key factor in creating the dynamism that I am talking about. International trade, especially exports, has proved in recent years to be the engine of growth for the successful economies of East and South East Asia. Given the poor resource endowment of Bangladesh we do not have any option other than transforming our abundant labour into exportable goods. Other countries in Asia have successfully done it. Why can't we? The garment industry is a proof if proof was needed to show that

neglected the social sectors. Without passing any value judgement on their policies and performance, let us look at some of the basic indicators.

Indonesia and Thailand have life expectancy at birth of 61.5 and 66.1 years respectively. In the case of Bangladesh and Nepal the figures are 51.8 and 52.2 respectively. In daily calorie supply the figures for Indonesia and Thailand are 116 and 106 (as % of requirements) and the corresponding figures for Bangladesh and Nepal are 83 and 93 respectively. The adult literacy figures for Indonesia and Thailand are: 72 and 91

Indonesia is 69.5 million, in Thailand 16.5 million. These are high figures but the figures for Bangladesh and Nepal are staggering. The number of people below the poverty line in Bangladesh, we are told, is 99.4 million and the figure in respect of Nepal is 11.6 million. Given the total population figures of these four countries we seem to come at the bottom of the ladder.

I can quote other figures to show the linkage between economic growth and changes in the key indicators on quality of life. Such change may not be automatic and we know of situations in which poverty has intensified even when growth rate has been high. However the figures quoted above and my observation of the experience of the rest of Asia leaves little doubt in my mind that poverty eradication efforts can gain strength and tempo only when the economy is growing and expanding. An economy in decline or stagnant or growing too slowly is not able to sustain a successful campaign for alleviation of poverty. The size of the cake must increase before the people can get a bigger slice.

At the initial stage of the growth process the inequality and concentration of wealth may increase somewhat but this need not be alarming if the wealth so accumulated is re-invested in productive ventures. In East and South East Asia this seems to have been the case. Under those circumstances the government will have larger tax revenues for undertaking targeted programmes for the benefit of specific sections and communities. In the recent television debate among the American presidential candidates Gov Clinton came out strongly in favour of this basic approach. He does not, in my view rightly, believe that the trickle down effect is adequate for the less fortunate sections of the

society and programmes must be initiated for the vulnerable groups. While our conditions are vastly different from those in the United States the basic approach advocated by Gov Clinton seem to be valid even in our context. Targeted programmes for the vulnerable groups are effective when the economy is dynamic and investment and employment and income are all rising. The first priority before the nation therefore is to stimulate the economy to grow and expand with the help of investments. In my view there is no substitute for investment as a means of changing our economic condition. While private sector investments — both domestic and foreign — should flow into the industry and agriculture sectors, public sector investments should be directed towards the building up of human resources and the physical infrastructure. I can hardly over-emphasize this point because I have seen how within the span of two decades the combined effect of domestic and foreign investments in Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia. The key indicators reflecting the quality of life started to improve rapidly.

Part of Total Package

The aim of eradication of poverty can not therefore be achieved in isolation. It has to be the part of a total economic package. With 99.4 million people below the poverty line we have a gigantic task ahead of us. While I do not underestimate the value of the current efforts of the NGOs as well as that of institutions such as the Grameen Bank I am convinced that real breakthrough in poverty alleviation will come only when the agriculture, industry, infrastructure and the services sectors are all pulsating with vitality. Unfortunately one can not say that today we are in that happy situation. With the law and order situation in a critical situation, a basic requirement for economic growth is lacking. Thus poverty alleviation will remain a forlorn hope for Bangladesh if the economy remains stagnant. Only determined and clear-sighted leadership can get the nation moving again.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

with imagination and drive it is possible to develop new export items.

Let us take a look at two low-growth South Asian countries, Bangladesh and Nepal and compare their performance in poverty alleviation with two high growth Asian countries, Indonesia and Thailand. The rate of their gross domestic product growth during the period 1989 to 1992 is as follows:

	1989	1990	1991	1992 (Forecasts)
Bangladesh	2.3	5.8	3.6	5.0
Nepal	3.9	3.6	4.0	4.5
Indonesia	7.4	7.1	6.0	6.5
Thailand	12.0	10.0	8.1	8.7

The figures are taken from the *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific, 1991* published by ESCAP.

Indonesia and Thailand followed the export-led strategy of economic growth. Foreign investment played a catalytic role in the growth process. Private sector was the main agent of economic activity. Generally it is believed that in their strong drive for high growth rate these countries

Other Indicators

UNDP has studied other indicators such as the number of people without access to safe drinking water or without access to health services. The UN agency has also looked at the infant mortality rate and the number of malnourished

children under the age of 5. In all these key areas the figures for Bangladesh and Nepal (where the data are available) are dismal but the record of Indonesia and Thailand are not only much better but steadily improving. According to the study the total number of people below the poverty line in

Drought Forces the Politicians to Talk Peace

David Orr writer from Maputo

Drought in Mozambique helped to increase the pressures for peace that brought together the rebel Renamo leaders and the government for renewed talks in Rome. This time Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe attended. A Gemini News Service correspondent visiting the country reports on the millions of Mozambicans who have fled from their villages in search of food and safety.

WHAT was at first a trickle has grown into a flood of ragged people leaving the rebel-held hinterland for the government-controlled towns and villages of Mozambique. Little else is moving across the parched landscape. The worst drought this century has turned once fast-flowing rivers into wide highways of sand.

A second year without rain and 17 years of civil war have driven more than five million Mozambicans — one-third of the population — from their homes in search of food and safety. International aid agencies say more than three million people are in need of emergency relief. Deaths from starvation and thirst are rising in the worst-affected central and southern provinces.

Lack of security in areas held by the rebel Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo) has made most of the country inaccessible to urgently needed relief convoys. In the last two months, 15 trucks loaded with food aid have been looted and destroyed by the rebels. Except for the Beira corridor linking the coast to Zimbabwe, few inland centres can be reached by road.

United Nations officials in the capital of Maputo believe widespread banditry could make it some time before an agreement with Renamo, to assure safe passage for government relief convoys, can be safely implemented.

"Apart from the danger of attacks, we don't know what condition the roads are in or

even if there are mines," says Dan O'Dell, UN Children's Fund (Unicef) representative in Maputo and an observer at the talks in Rome between Renamo and the Mozambique government.

"We'll be going into communities which haven't seen outsiders for six or seven years. They won't trust us. We have to build confidence slowly."

Another problem is that it is not known how much control is held by Renamo leader Alfonso Dhlakama over the estimated 20,000-strong rebel force. There is no guarantee that the more isolated or independent guerrilla units will respect the UN and Red Cross banners of the relief convoys.

"We don't know how many people are living in the Renamo-held areas," says March Latham of the UN World Food Programme (WFP) in Maputo. "Perhaps it's no more than 10 per cent of the population."

"What we do know is that there's going to be a rapid escalation in deaths if we don't get food in soon. For many it is already arriving too late."

While a relief agreement signed in Rome by both sides after two years of talks was regarded as the first stage of the peace process, several issues are unresolved.

These include the composition of a new national army, security guarantees for Renamo's political future and certain articles in the 1990 constitution such as the President's emergency powers.

Before the latest round of talks in Rome, President Joaquim Chissano said: "I'm not over-optimistic. Renamo wants what we want, freedom and democracy. There is no reason for this war. But much of the time they are arguing in the air, not on the table."

It is the drought which has finally brought Renamo to Rome. With people ebbing away from rebel-held territory and even their own fighters deserting, they realised that soon they would be left with no constituency. They also fear that an end to the fighting will mean an end to Renamo.

In recent months, Renamo has intensified its attacks on food convoys and on suburbs, especially the "zonas verdes," the food-producing areas.

In the face of drought and crop failure, the rebels in central Mozambique have been mounting increasingly desperate attempts to secure provisions. There have even been reports of villages being attacked for clothing by raiders in rags.

Since pledging itself to the overthrow of the ruling Frelimo party in 1975, Renamo's tactic has been the complete destabilisation of services and infrastructure in the former Portuguese colony.

Schools, health centres and factories have been destroyed, as have roads and railway lines. Despite the government renunciation of Marxist principles in 1989 and the promise the following year of democratic elections, the rebels have pursued their campaign of sabotage and disruption.

Villagers continue to be forcibly conscripted by Renamo units and children of 10 or 11 made to take up arms. People are routinely mutilated or executed for refusing to cooperate in carrying supplies and proving rations to the fighters.

"They're really just armed bandits," says David Antonio,

district administrator of Machaze, in central Manica province. "They have no objective anymore, just survival. They cut off people's genitals, breasts and limbs. These things could only be done by animals."

Machaze's 25,000 inhabitants became isolated in 1983 after continued attacks made the road into their village unsafe. Until 1990, Machaze produced a crop surplus, despite the farmers' constant fears of attack while they worked the fields. Now drought makes all cultivation impossible.

In recent weeks, 2,000 people have come from the bush into Machaze to escape the rebels and to look for food. Where once they obliged farmers to sustain them, the rebels are now letting people go because they can no longer till the soil.

The displaced arrived sick and malnourished, dressed in tattered rags. Many of the children and old people are weak after walking for days without food. Because of shortages in Machaze, only those in critical condition can be given valuable grain. Living in a clear-

ing surrounded by trees, the people scavenge for roots and berries which make their stomachs and joints swell.

In the village of Chibabava in neighboring Sofala province, hundreds of "recuperados", people freed from Renamo-held territory by the army, huddle under makeshift shelters on open ground.

"All the suffering we have gone through is because of Renamo," says Manuel Naene, a farmer whose livestock was taken by the rebels.

"We were forced to supply them with food and clothes. Sometimes they said we didn't work hard enough and they beat us. In the next village a family who refused to help them had their ears cut off."

Since arriving in Chibabava, one of Naene's four children has died of starvation. His two-year-old daughter is severely malnourished.

For Renamo in particular, the drought is a serious political disadvantage. The reduction of external support from South Africa, Malawi and Kenya has forced the rebels to rely increasingly on raiding and taxing the residents of the areas they control. Their policy has been to stockpile food from past taxation, but these reserves have all but run out.

By all indices — infant mortality, life expectancy, per capita income, literacy and medical care — Mozambique is the unhappiest nation on earth. And not until a ceasefire is signed and drought effects are alleviated does this seem likely to change.

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.

Apprehending terrorists

Sir, Press conference recently held by Col (Retd) Faruque was a glaring example of high handedness in state matters. His statement bears testimony to the fact that there are other conspirators holding high positions with capability to endanger legally constituted government. A person with a background of serving in a disciplined organisation, Mr Faruque is also well known to the public as self-declared killer of no less a person than Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and usurper of political power.

Begum Khaleda Zia has done a laudable job in apprehending terrorist elements, in her student front and dissolving the DU unit. She should be praised for giving support to

the law-enforcing agency in curbing terrorism, gangsterism and killing in the name of politics. But this should not be the last of her actions. There are parties, groups and factions with nefarious motives who maintain arsenal in halls, dormitories and party offices, openly brandish weapons and provoke killing by declared hit-list. They must be apprehended. All illegal weapons should be seized. The present action must be continued in right earnest to single out "terror" persons and groups whoever or wherever they are. Existing laws of the land are considered sufficient if applied without fear or favour.

The first and foremost duty of a legally constituted government is to maintain law and order to the extent that people lead a peaceful life, businesses flourish, farms and industries

produce and economy grow. It is incumbent on the government to take the lead in these matters and that is what Begum Khaleda Zia has done. It now rests on others to follow suit. I hope that good sense will prevail upon all concerned to uphold constitutional rights and not any party aggrandisement.

I also believe that law enforcing agencies will use their own conscience and spirit of duties in curbing all sorts of malpractices and rise above party factions. Their service is guaranteed by the constitution to serve the cause of the people and country, not of any party or group.

Democracy can flourish only by mutual consensus and by well organised and honest state machinery. Let us take a vow to work unitedly to make the country healthy and strong for the sake of our posterity.

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By the year 2000

Sir, We often come across the slogans "Education for all by 2000", "Health for all by 2000", etc in meetings and

seminars as also in news media. But we are yet to know what meaningful steps have been taken in this regard. Only seven years are left for us to embrace 2000 AD.

To my mind, if we want to see a spectacular success of the slogans, what is necessary is to pinpoint the problems which need to be solved without any loss of time.

Whether it is health or education, the matter is of considerable public importance. The British government in their administrative set up had given nomenclature to the ministry and departments adding "public" prefix like "Dept of Public Health", "Dept of Public Instruction" apparently with the object to minimize government responsibility in the executions of business of these departments.

It is indeed a matter of hope that now the departments are named like "Dept of Health" which ensures responsibility of government. But like many other departments, in these departments also the instances of inaction and wastage are in existence. However, by ensuring the process of "accountability", there

is room for bringing about steady improvement.

What is necessary is to sort out the points where inaction and wastage are very much in existence and by the application of accountability such things can effectively be checked. The democratic government, it is expected, will take adequate measures so that slogans find an easy implementation.

S M Hussain Mirpur, Dhaka

Requisition of private vehicles

Sir, The police (Traffic Dept) are apparently abusing their powers by requisitioning private transports like jeeps, pick-ups, trucks, micro-buses etc in the name of "urgent duties", causing a lot of harassment to the members of the public. In some cases it has been noticed that the police sergeant compelled girl students and even the owner of vehicle and members of the family to get down from the transport in the street!

It may be noted here that the police might have requisitioned transports from various ministries, departments, directorates, corporations, mini-bus owners' association, truck owners' association etc. Again there are many companies and firms in Dhaka who give their transports on hire on rental basis. But the police do not want to spend money and they are after the private vehicles for such requisition causing a lot of concern to the owners of the vehicle.

The police do not have the right to cause mental torture and harassment to the owners of private vehicles. Moreover, if the vehicles are damaged in course of raids etc the police will not compensate the owners who purchased their vehicles with their hard-earned money. In a democracy, such activities on the part of police cannot be imagined. If the police require such transports, government should purchase and earmark some vehicles for them on a permanent basis.

We would, therefore, appeal to the government to see that such forcible requisition of the private vehicles by the police does not happen in future.

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