

Conversation with UNESCO Expert

'Education for All by 2000'— Can Bangladesh Make it?

by Rahat Fahmida

LIKE all other developing countries, Bangladesh has made a strong commitment to bring — education for all by the year 2000. It is no doubt an ambitious target for a country whose rate of literacy is below 25 per cent. The general consensus among experts is that the country should reach at least 50 per cent literacy rate by the end of this century, which will be still considerably less, what most South East Asian countries, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore have achieved for last three decades.

In case of Bangladesh, presently there are a number of constraints. Firstly, when you talk of compulsory primary education, then you must provide facilities, close to a child's home. This means, there should be a school available within a reasonable walking distance. Secondly, you should have trained and qualified teachers with good curriculum. Presently, in Bangladesh, I

certain, very basic elementary education — that is, elementary literacy, elementary numeracy, for their children. What is needed, is — you have to mobilise all social forces together to make it work. Just by in-acting a law and passing a government decree, you cannot have universal primary education, in a country like Bangladesh, where presently, the literacy percentage is

mobilisation of the community, allocation of resources, and a long term programme for the provision of facilities. This includes, school building, education aid, qualified teachers and so on.

DS: As I was coming up to your office, I saw a number of posters with the slogan — 'Educate a woman — Educate a

are carried out by Bangladeshi experts, under the guidance of an international expert, to prepare some programme for secondary education.

At the moment, there is a major on-going programme in Bangladesh, which is the general education project, that is funded by World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and a number of other bilateral donors. This general education project, provides for all — construction of school buildings, which is mainly one of the key elements. But we are involved in areas like teacher education, curriculum development and so on. But there are also education of the disadvantaged group, which includes — women, in case of other countries, not necessarily in case of Bangladesh, ethnic and religious minorities, people living in isolated areas, or even slum dwellers. These are the specific problems.

So in case of Bangladesh, yes, with regard to women, women's education rather. In this general education project, we have got some of the government has got some specific priorities, with which we are associated.

DS: What new projects does UNESCO plan to promote or set up in Bangladesh?

HA: In Bangladesh, apart from these two on-going activities, one is a part of general education project and one is a sort of a project preparatory assistance for a bigger project in the secondary education sector. We are not immediately involved in any other activities. But depending on government's own programmes and priorities we might get future involvement. In fact, World Bank is presently exploring the possibility of the next phase of the general education project. Presently the first phase, or the present on-going programme, I think will be completed some time around 1995. And they have

started their preparatory work for the next one. And it is quite likely that we, UNESCO, as a specialised agency in the field of education, amongst many others, with the support of UNDP and World Bank, get involved in areas, what we call the soft ware development, mostly key elements of a successful education programme are — appropriate curriculum, trained teachers, designing low cost school buildings and so on. These are the areas where we have got very high degree of expertise, and where possibly we will continue to cooperate with the government.

DS: Over the years, UNESCO has been assisting Bangladesh in a number of projects. Which do you consider to be the most successful one? And why?

HA: It is a very difficult question. Because you know,

would say, it is very difficult for us to say which is the successful project. But one thing I would say is this, that we are able to generate more and more, or stimulate a greater awareness, about some of the key factors inhibiting the expansion of education in our country. And that I would call a success, which means people in Bangladesh are slowly becoming aware of the essentiality of education, including — the administrators, educational planners, practitioners of education, even at the highest level. For example, the very fact, that now law has been passed in the country, requiring people to send their children to school, is a reflection of that awareness. It may take some time, before this can be really translated into a programme into some major activity. But, I would say, these are some of the stimulating aware-

DS: There have been a number of organisations other than UNESCO, assisting Bangladesh in various education projects. So, why do you think it is taking such a long time to increase our percentage of literacy?

HA: In the promotion of literacy in any country, the main engine of growth must be the government. Government will have to pull it by providing appropriate resources, as I said earlier, through right policy intervention. It has happened in case of Thailand, it has happened in case of China, Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, all these places.

For example, in China in 1949, literacy was 20 per cent, today it is 80 per cent. In 1949, China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh were at the same level.

In case of Bangladesh if you take male literacy it is about 50 per cent, but female literacy is less than 16 or 17 per cent. Obviously when 50 per cent of the population are outside your orbit of literacy, the total percentage goes down. So, I think, one of the reasons, first I would say, that, government has never been able to demonstrate a strong political will supported by allocation of resources, and policy intervention for promotion of literacy in our country. This is, I would consider, the most critical factor in our country. The rest comes subsidiary. But now we find, one of the redeeming features in our country today, non-government organisations (NGOs), have really come up in a very significant way, in providing support to this literacy programme, particularly adult, non-formal literacy. We hear a lot about Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), which is rather a big organisation. But there are many others, smaller ones, local ones, which have been providing similar support.

So, basically, it boils down to one critical factor, that government's will determination, and support facilities are essential.

DS: Thank you for sharing your opinion and experiences with us.



Hedayat Ahmed at his Bangkok office.

think, there is a shortage of teachers. But most important, there should be a total community involvement.

Government by law cannot make children go to school, or cannot make parents send their children to school. Unless the parents themselves realise the utility, the usefulness of imparting education to their children. That is why, it is important, that we should stimulate the awareness of the parents, about the need for

about 34 or 35 per cent.

Secondly, you should also realise, that one of the reason for low literacy in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan is mainly because of low female literacy. You should have appropriate policy intervention directed to those specific problems. A law is a good thing. Conceptually, ethically, it is a right thing. But it has to be, as I said earlier, it has to be backed and supported by appropriate policy intervention, which means,

nation'. In this regard, do you have any immediate plans for Bangladesh?

HA: As I put it earlier, we provide assistance, support, when it is called for. So, we have been working in Bangladesh through UNDP (United Nation Development Project) programme in a number of areas. This includes, restructuring of the primary education, also in the secondary education sector, we are undertaking some studies, which



Efforts continue for achieving education for all by the year 2000.

Photo: Shehjad Noorani

ness and particularly creating, highlighting some of the factors, which inhibit growth of education or rather expansion of education like — disadvantaged women, children, ethnic groups and so on. I would consider, these are the activities; these are the areas, where we have been able to stimulate a greater awareness of the administrators and policy makers. These are the areas, I would consider, where we have succeeded.

Much Ado About Sex in Comics

WILLIAM Shakespeare and the long-suffering Japanese say — they both have something in common.

They both appear in mangas — the Japanese comics that have hundreds of thousands of devoted followers among this country's population and whose sales reached five billion yen (US \$39 million) last year.

But scantily clad women appear in the popular illustrated books, too, and an uproar over too much sex in mangas for children is threatening the lucrative comics industry.

Manga editors are now battling educators, mothers, the government and even the police who are all trying to put a stop to suggestive drawings, naked females, and scenes of rape that fill pages of comic

satisfied and happy. Ten billion comic books were published last year, earning one-third of the total income generated by Japanese publishing houses.

Not every manga story is spiced with sex and violence. But until complaints about the books' contents began intensifying two years ago, half of those available to both adults and teen-aged children contained some references to sex.

Publishers maintain that sex scenes and physical violence in the mangas are 'protected', based on the principle of freedom of speech and the need for society to be more open about these subjects.

Lately, however, some publishers have come out to declare that the mangas are generally free of sexual nuances.

But media experts like Seiji Arihara disagree. 'Editors may

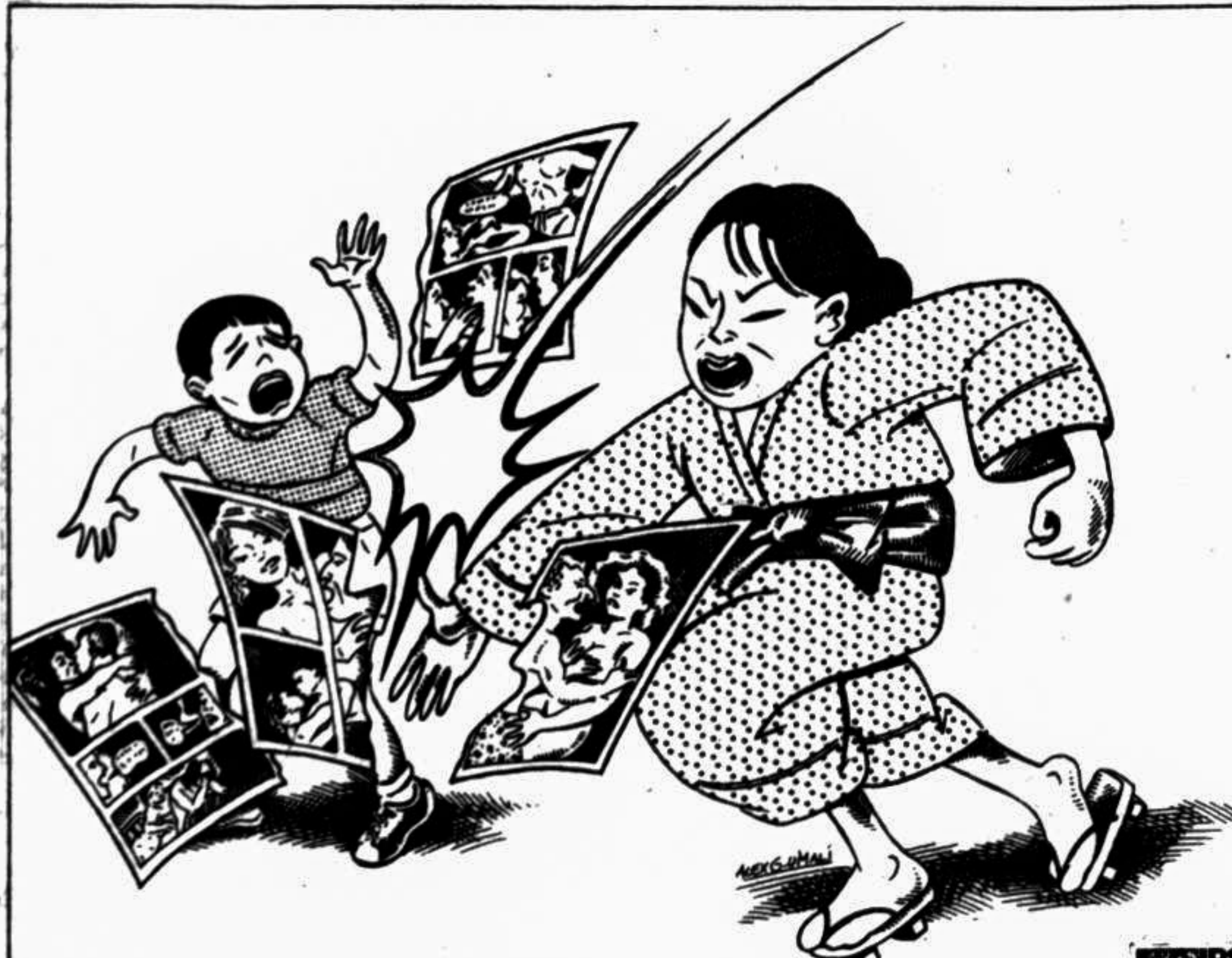
in hundreds of thousands — that are churned out by the publishers every week.

A typical story in mangas aimed for middle school children may be a romance where sex is commonplace.

Then there are comics meant for targeted for young adults, but which women generally ignore. These comic books depict rape, dismembered bodies and unnatural sex scenes as prominent features. Such Mangas are not considered part of the vast pornographic magazine market.

In Osaka, Japan's second largest city, a regulation has been passed giving the governor the right to designate a material as pornographic if a third of the book contains scenes of sex, rape and naked women.

Editor Hiroyuki Shinoda said the line distinguishing



books written for teenagers.

'I am determined to protect children from being influenced by these dirty books,' fumed Keiki Maruyama, a mother of two.

Complaints over the contents of the mangas have been brewing for years but the debate boiled over in April when a 14-year-old boy was charged with molesting little girls in western Japan. The boy said he was trying out what he had been reading in comic books.

Comics top reading fare lists in Japan for both adults and children, and the variety of subjects ranging from literature classics to the travails of the modern Japanese have kept readers — and publishers

be observing some kind of restriction by excluding sexual illustrations. In children's comics,' said Arihara, a noted animation critic. 'But the crux of the matter is that for the Japanese, nothing matters when it comes to making profits.'

So far, manga sex critics are winning what began as an uphill fight and have forced bookshops to mark comics that are deemed appropriate for children. There has also been a demand for bookshop owners to stock adult comics separately from those for children.

Under the present system, young children still have access to a wide range of titles —

comics or visual shows for children is thin in Japan in contrast to the West. Indeed, one of the most popular television programmes enjoyed by both older children and adults in this country often feature light banter about sex and nude women.

But modern pressures such as long working hours and heavy study schedules are demanding quick, easy reading, changing traditional norms drastically.

The result is that subways in Tokyo are full of teenagers and commuters going to and from office reading not newspapers, but lurid comic books. — IPS

It's Back to School for Burmese Colleges

by Minn Thu

SCHOOLS back for more than 320,000 students when universities and colleges reopen August 24, some 254 days after they were closed last December 12.

Institutes of higher learning were closed following two days of student protests during International Human Rights Day, the day imprisoned Aung San Suu Kyi — who remains under house arrest — was to receive the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize.

The move comes as the ruling military junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), enters its fifth year of power after a coup d'etat in September 19, 1988 that toppled 26 years of authoritarian rule.

On August 10, Myanmar (formerly Burma) also introduced a new teaching system, establishing a brand new University of Distance Learning which observers believe would lead to the privatisation of colleges and universities.

Security would play a key role when campuses reopen as the state-run media has warned against 'destructive acts' and 'external interference' which disturb the peaceful pursuit of education.

Contingency plans have been worked out and uniformed campus security per-

sonnel have been seen manning all exits and entries to walled campuses. Eyewitnesses say various departments within the main Rangoon University campus were fenced off from each other.

Observers describe the preparations as 'compartmentalisation' for the easy isolation of any student protest. A proctor system, used in Britain's Oxford and Cambridge universities, could also be introduced within campuses with teachers

movement. What began as a teashop brawl between local youth and students at the Rangoon Institute of Technology in March 1988 resulted in what observers called a spontaneous national upheaval that led to the ouster of one-man rule.

Student protests spread nationwide and schools were closed as early as June. This was followed by the resignation

of former strongman Ne Win who took over Burma in 1962 with a rigid and isolationist 'Burmese Way to Socialism' one-party dictatorship. (The 82-year-old general still retains enormous influence behind the scenes.)

By August 1988 universities and colleges were also closed, days before the military coup which brought the SLORC into power and crushed the pro-democracy movement. Except for universities and colleges, schools were gradually reopened in June 1989. It was already January 1991 when medical and dental schools

Security would play a key role when college campuses reopen as the state-run media warned against 'destructive acts' and 'external interference' which disturb the peaceful pursuit of education

were reopened, followed by other colleges and universities in May. All institutes of higher learning were reopened by October.

But not before thousands of students, fearing mass arrests following the coup, fled to border regions and went underground. Though some 4,000 students had returned at the 27 'reception camps' still maintained by the government, some remained behind and formed student bat-

talions to fight military rule under the All Burma Student Democratic Front.

Other students formed about eight political parties that contested in the SLORC-sponsored elections in 1990. None of these students won seats and all of their political parties disbanded for various reasons.

Mrs Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize winner, and her party won and overwhelming victory but the legislature to which they won 392 of 485 seats is still to be convened by the SLORC.

The SLORC, in turn, has insisted on a constitutional convention by January 1993 to frame an entirely new constitution before allowing a legislature to convene.

In December last year, colleges and universities were again closed after students demonstrated to demand the release of Mrs Suu Kyi, the speedy transfer of power to civilian rule, the opening of the legislature and the legalisation of student unions. Some 7,479 college students studying in the capital were sent home.

According to official statistics, there were more than 7.3 million students in the last 1991-92 academic year. They were studying in 36,499 primary and 2,026 secondary schools, 128 vocational training schools and 36 institutes of higher learning manned by about 275,000 teachers.

About 260,173 were college students while 61,693 were high school graduates ready to join colleges. Figures for the current 1992-93 academic year are not available.

Myanmar has an adult literacy rate of 80.6 per cent, a figure which compares quite favourably with rates for its Southeast Asian neighbours. The rate refers to the percent-

age of the populated aged 15 years and above who can read and write.

As of 1990, the country's illiterates numbered 4,882,000. Enrollment in the elementary level in 1987 was equivalent to 107 per cent (enrollment in the primary level sometimes exceeds the total primary school age population because of repeaters). But enrollment in the secondary or high school level is a very low 24 per cent for the same year.

In the college or tertiary level, 489 out of every 100,000 people were in school as of 1980, according to the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

The SLORC has reportedly spend US\$778.83 million in the last 1991-92 fiscal year on education — or US\$131.1 million more than the previous year. The budget for education in the current academic year is estimated at US\$646.42 million.

Now Myanmar will introduce a new teaching system by establishing a brand new University of Distance Learning to cope with the huge backlog of high school graduates and college students whose further studies were cut off by the prolonged closure of colleges and universities. Myanmar urgently needs to introduce the concept of distance learning which is already well-established in Asia, a university professor says.

The University of Distance Learning will take in all students currently enrolled in university correspondence courses started in 1973. Arts and science courses will be offered by the open university and other courses will follow by 1993-94.

Observers believe the new university paves the way for the privatisation of higher education — at first since the 1964 nationalisation of all mission and private schools. Private tuitions for high schools were allowed but not for universities although some existed unofficially.

Informed sources and education officials say that any interested persons are now allowed to register and teach university curriculum officially. Hopefully, this will lead to the privatisation of universities and colleges.

— Depthnews Asia

Germany Donates USD 724,000 to Technical and Vocational Training

GERMANY signed an agreement on 17 July committing USD 724,000 to a UNESCO project on technical and vocational training to promote and support the development of effective national systems of training in Member States.

The funds cover an initial period of 17 months starting on 1 August 1992. Although the countries to be assisted have not yet been chosen, the project is aimed at developing countries as well as countries in Eastern and Central Europe.

The agreement was signed by the German government and Colin Power UNESCO's Assistant Director General for Education, in Bonn. Germany will also establish a programme implementation unit in Berlin to collaborate with UNESCO on the project.

The project, approved by the Organization's highest decision-making body, the General Conference, at the end

of last year, follows a feasibility study carried out on the link between technical and vocational education and employment.

Among the main objectives of the project are international exchange of experience and studies on policy issues; the strengthening of national research and development capabilities; and facilitating access to data bases and documentation.

Other project funds will come from UNESCO's regular programme, extra-budgetary resources and donations from Member States.

The acting chief of UNESCO's Technical and Vocational Education Section, Rolando Tiburtini, said the project will particularly benefit developing countries which have problems of modernizing and expanding technical and vocational education due to inadequate research and development infrastructures, as well as shortages of technical and material resources.

Tiburtini said regional training workshops and international symposia will be held to prepare and discuss case and comparative studies on trends and continuing technical and vocational education, including retraining.

Envisaged under the projects is the development of prototype curricula, pilot projects on co-operation between technical and vocational education institutions and the world of work, and the publication of an international bulletin on technical and vocational education.

Also foreseen is the preparation and dissemination of computerized data on technical and vocational education and the preparation of an inventory of national and regional technical and vocational education institutions.

— UNESCO Press.