

Stop SKOP

The decision of SKOP, an umbrella body of public sector workers and employees, to hold the country hostage by forcing a 48-hour strike on 29 and 30 November, is a classic case of a coercive interest subverting the national. The SKOP demands, to force the implementation of which the work stoppage has been announced, have all proved to be counter productive for our economic growth, and can be held singularly responsible for the economic malaise in which we find ourselves at the moment.

SKOP's strategy is a numbers game. Its value, though it has no legal standing, comes from the fact that it has been able to gather under its wings a large number of unions and associations covering the various sectors of the nationalised industries. Thus it has become a monopoly voice. But a monopoly voice is necessarily neither a legitimate nor a correct voice. It is this monopoly that SKOP brandishes against the government and against its own dissenters. Those constituents of SKOP who may have opposed the proposed strike have been silenced, again through the numbers game.

It is the bluff of this game that the government must now call. For if SKOP has a few thousand workers and employees behind it, then its opponents have the rest of the nation. However, for the nation to become aware of the bankrupt and anti-national nature of the SKOP's demands, the government, the political parties and various other bodies must take the issue to the people. In this regard the initiative by the Bangladesh Employers Association (BEA) is one in the right direction. This should now be followed up by a well co-ordinated campaign through television, radio and newspapers explaining to the people why the demands of SKOP are against the interest of the nation as a whole. We suspect that SKOP's own members, driven by a promise of higher wages, are not fully aware of how their demands go against the greater interest of the nation.

Let us examine some of the main demands of SKOP. The demand for a national minimum wage can be construed as nothing but a demand to reduce employment. For that is what it will result into. Minimum wages make sense only in reference to the capacity of an industry to pay. Otherwise, it only contributes to driving new enterprises away and making existing ones uncompetitive, resulting in reduced employment opportunities. As for wage hikes in the nationalised sector, again there cannot be any across the board decision but only on an ability-to-pay criterion. The record of performance of the public sector industries has been so dismal, bringing into frequent question their financial viability, that the demand for an overall wage hike smacks of a conspiracy to bring down those, very few, industries that are keeping their heads above the water.

To demand for a halt in the process of privatisation is to demand to go against the current of history and the experiences of all the countries that have suffered from a bloated and inefficient public sector. The best measure to stop privatisation of the nationalised industries is to make them efficient and competitive. Otherwise, it is nothing more than a demand for the continuation of the same inefficiency. But SKOP is totally silent on that score. About retrenchment, definitely it cannot be recklessly implemented. Through retaining, new opportunities could be created. Here again, what do we have to learn from the 'Asian Tigers' — the NIC's? The best guarantee for workers' continued employment is expansion and growth of the economy, and the rise in the market value of labour. Just as with opportunity an enterprise expands, so with setbacks it has to cut its costs. The investor must have this flexibility; otherwise, like a giant ship trying to navigate through narrow straits, it will founder. To deprive an employer of the right to "hire and fire" is to deprive an entrepreneur of his or her essential maneuverability and hence the chance to survive in the market place.

SKOP is out of tune with the times and out of step with the needs of the country. It is flexing its muscles without realising the bankruptcy of its position. The government should in no way allow its brute force — highly exaggerated, because it has not been challenged — to move us back into the trap of failed policies. The opposition must play a very responsible role in this instance. It cannot side with anti-national demands just because it provides and opportunity to strengthen their position against the government.

There is still time for the SKOP to move away from the path of confrontation. It should desist from threatening moves and open a dialogue, through the legally representatives bodies, with the government and others concerned as to how to promote economic growth. That is the only way to protect the long term interest of the workers and employees.

Data Bank

Planning Minister Zahiruddin Khan declared his intention of setting up a data bank at the Planning Commission to enable policy makers to have better access to facts for policy formulation purposes. We welcome Mr Khan's suggestion and urge him to go full-steam in implementing this idea. The proposed data bank should incorporate the latest statistics on all aspects of the economy, demography and social services, including education and health.

It is obvious that the proposed data bank will take some time to set up, yet getting it off the ground immediately will go a long way to fill a critical void in our development effort. More than setting it up, feeding the 'bank' with all the relevant data will take considerable time.

We would like to warn the planning minister that far harder than implementing the project will be the task of commencing his ministerial colleagues to use the data that the project will make available. Long used to rhetorics and speaking without the fear that somewhere and somehow somebody may come up with the latest data to contradict the passionate assertion he just made, colleagues of Mr Khan may find the data bank to be a bit intimidating, it not incapacitating.

The data bank must be made accessible to the public and to the private institutions as well. In fact, for a reasonable fee the services of the data bank should be made available to all. The newspapers — and there are more and more of them every day — should be a sure group of subscribers for that service.

SINCE the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey, which has hosted high-level meetings of various kinds, witnessed a summit, which can be best described as a family summit. It took place in Ankara and the participants were the Heads of States of Azerbaijan, the four Turkic Central Asian Republics and the host Turkey. It was rich in symbolism and substance.

The occasion was the 69th anniversary of the founding of the Turkish Republic by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and the media here labelled as Cifte Bayram (double feast).

On the reviewing stand in Ankara stood President Abulfelch Ebilayev of Azerbaijan, President Islam Kerimov of Uzbekistan, President Askar Akayev of Kirghistan, President Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan, President Turgut Ozal and Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel of Turkey. After seventy years of belonging to the Soviet Union, the Turkish family was uniting for the first time. Another first was the opening of the Embassies of the newly independent republics and the entire Turkish establishment including the

A FAMILY SUMMIT

Turkey Strengthens Ties with Muslim Central Asian Republics

Arshad-uz Zaman writes from Istanbul

President, the Prime Minister and the head of the armed forces were present. The summit began on a Friday morning and after the opening session all the Heads of States offered their Juma prayers at the Presidential Palace. If these were the first embassies of the newly independent republics, Turkey was the first to recognize them and her embassies in all the capitals are in place.

In his opening address, President Turgut Ozal stated that the participants had an obligation to produce concrete results and could not return to their countries empty handed. He said that history had provided an unique occasion and in an euphoric mood stated that if the occasion was seized the 21st century could become the Turkish Century. The summit produced a

remarkable document known as the Ankara Declaration. In the six point declaration, the leaders expressed their confidence that the summit would promote bilateral and multilateral relations, expressed their determination to follow the road of democracy, human rights, secularism, social justice and market economy, strengthen cultural and educational ties in the light of common history, annual meeting of Foreign Ministers and the next summit in Baku, capital of Azerbaijan in October 1993. In order to give teeth to the Declaration, the leaders decided on setting up working groups whose task would be to prepare concrete projects in the fields of land, sea and air communication, infrastructure

for telecommunication, development of trade and economic relations, projects in industry, energy, agriculture and service sectors as well as transportation of oil and gas. This last item is of special interest to Turkey and her projects to carry oil and gas by pipeline from Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan to Turkish ports are ready. Turkmenistan-Turkey natural gas pipeline will be 4790 km long, will have a capacity of 40 billion cubic metres, will cost 14 billion dollars and will take 3 years to complete. Kazakhstan-Turkey pipeline for oil will be 2013 km long, will have a capacity of 35 million tons annually, will cost 2.3 billion dollars and will be completed in about a year and a half. The

working groups will be working on these and many other projects in various sectors.

Diplomatic relations between Turkey and her family members are a little over a year old. Turkey has plunged headlong into a multifaceted relationship with all of them. Already hundreds of students from those republics are attending educational institutions here, cadets are being trained in the military academies. Both the public and private sectors have moved forcefully into the region.

During the Ankara festivities one foreign presence was the Russian Ambassador. Whether it was to welcome the Heads of State or the opening of the embassies, he was present every where. One columnist drew a parallel between the 69th anniversary and the

tenth anniversary in 1933. When Marshal Voroshilov, the Head of the Soviet armed forces was the honoured guest. In the earlier part of this year, when I visited the republics of the former Soviet Union, I noticed that each republic had a large Russian population and in Kazakhstan it reached nearly 50%. I also noted that farther we moved from Turkey, Turkish was becoming less and less comprehensible and in Kazakhstan only the names were Turkish. It is therefore no wonder that Ankara Declaration is in Turkish and Russian.

This unusual summit has brought together members of the same family on the same platform. The Ankara Declaration has gone a very long way in setting up structures for future action. Family relations are being tightened through new links that are being forged. Summing up the Summit Premier Demirel said, 'a new world has been born. A new geography is taking shape.'

The writer is retired Ambassador and Assistant Secretary-General, OIC.

Bill Clinton: A Glimpse of Our Days in Struggle

by Noazesh Ahmed

I had a brief encounter with Bill Clinton in February 1972. The place was the George Washington University. It was a difficult time. Though Bangladesh emerged as a new country in the world map, it was not yet recognized by the USA (Nixon Administration).

I had a slide-sound presentation entitled 'Portrait of Bangladesh' at the university auditorium. The idea was to generate enough support among American citizens for an early recognition of Bangladesh by the United States. The slide show was one of the items of that endeavour. The programme was sponsored by Bangladesh Information Center run by a group of American friends of Bangladesh in Washington DC. These friends were primarily composed of American doctors and AID officials working in the then East Pakistan. At that time Senator Ted Kennedy and Frank Church along with many other Senate leaders were working hard to pressurise the Nixon Administration for the recognition of Bangladesh. The World Bank was planning to send a mission in the country.

Joan Baez just had her concert at the university of Maryland where she sang 'The Story of Bangladesh'. George McGovern was busy with his primaries for the democratic ticket. Chicago based Bangladesh Foundation headed by Dr FR Khan was very active in promoting the country during the early days of the independence period. In Bangladesh Mission in Washington DC, A Muhith and Syed Moazzem Ali played an active role at that time.

Against this backdrop my little slide show was organized covering the genial people and enchanting landscape of Bangladesh and depicting the brutality and genocide inflicted by Pakistan army on that helpless land. David and Kaiser (Kaiser Zaman presently with UNHCR) of the Information Center were distributing endorsement forms to the audience.

After the show a very friendly young fellow with boyish face approached me: 'I am Bill Clinton. You have a very pretty country like our Arkansas. So bad, what a terrible thing happened there.'

President Nixon is guilty on two counts: first by sending arms to Pakistan and now not recognizing Bangladesh. No



one can stop it, we are all behind you." He touched my shoulder with his warm hand. Eventually Bangladesh was recognized by USA in April 1972 after four months of our victory over the

Pakistan occupation army. Two things, I thought, worked very well: one was the strong pressure from American citizens and leaders and the other one was the interview of Bangabandhu by David Frost. The impact of the interview was immeasurable.

By the way, I had a mixed feeling on Arkansas. The state was the home of Senator Fulbright and I was a Fulbright scholar in mid fifties. But the state had a bad reputation on account of racial segregation. Bill Clinton must have done enough groundwork as the Governor of the state for 12 years to gain the respect and confidence of black population there.

It was a matter of natural interest when I heard the name of Bill Clinton of Arkansas as a candidate for US President. My first reaction on his victory was exhilarating. It immediately reminded me of that friendly face and warm hand that touched me two decades ago — a genuine friend of poor Bangladesh.

Who is Bill Clinton? What is his basic outlook on human affairs? How does he relate to our poor Third World countries? These are natural enquiries. As for Bill Clinton he has come to his present eminence through a long journey of commitment and involvement. He entered into public life in his student days — a formative stage for broader perspective on justice and morality, when he made a protest against rigid institution and unjust war. His direct participation in anti-war, anti-Vietnam war movement during his student days is not only praiseworthy, but indicative of the genuine humanism and pragmatism in him. In short, Clinton is basically an honest humanist.

Today's Bill Clinton, President-elect of the United States, would generally be assessed on his economic and political agenda. Let those considerations be left to the pundits. But my assessment is a simple one — I consider him to be a leader of vision on the principles of justice and equality. As pledge bound, he would

perhaps immediately concentrate on domestic issues like the economy, budget deficit, employment, health care etc. But I am sure with his vision on international affairs, he would be less inclined, unlike his predecessors, to boost arms race and to make the poor countries the victim of that venture. In Asia, he would most likely want to see a freeze in military vandalism and that unholy phenomena where soldiering has become a business under the umbrella of US support as apparent in many countries of the region. We hope that as the President of United States he would look into the huge unaccountable resources being spent in military institutions and divert these to the much needed economic and social development.

The citizen of Bangladesh should give a hearty welcome to President Clinton and acknowledge a profound gratitude for his help in various fora in our struggle for independence and recognition during those trying times of our people.

A volatile mix of oil and arms threatens to spoil peace prospects in South-east Asia in the post-Cold War era.

Tensions have risen in recent months as China has aggressively asserted its claims to the potentially oil-rich Spratly and Pratael island groups in the South China Sea — also claimed in whole or in part by Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei.

That in turn is adding more fuel to an ongoing mini-arms race in the region as countries modernise their air and naval forces in anticipation of possible maritime conflict in the future.

Representatives of the six claimant nations met early July in Yogyakarta, Indonesia for the third in a series of meetings over the past two years aimed at coming up with ways to jointly develop the region's oil resources.

As expected, the meeting produced no breakthroughs as positions hardened in response to China's unilateral actions, which began early this year with the passage of a maritime law declaring full sovereignty over the Spratlys.

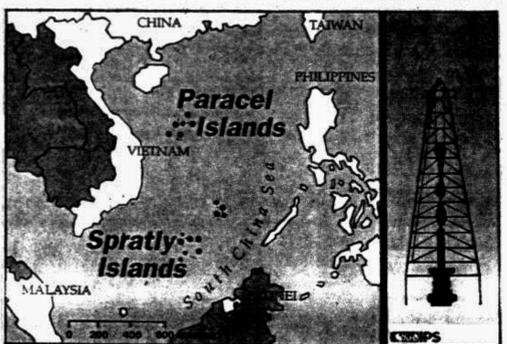
But the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) planned to use the July meeting of its foreign ministers in Manila to extract a clearer explanation from Chinese officials of Beijing's intentions.

China has just become an ASEAN dialogue-partner and

South-East Asia

Oil and Arms Make a Volatile Mix

A new row over the potentially oil-rich islands in the South China Sea is adding momentum to a mini-arms race in the South-east Asian region. Ramon Isberto of IPS reports from Manila.



will thus be a participant in the post-ministerial meetings ASEAN holds with countries like the United States, Japan and the European Community. "We are trying to figure out what China is up to," said Alan Ortiz, deputy director of the Philippine's National Security Council.

The latest worrisome turn of events was China's announcement in June of a contract allowing a US firm, Chestone Energy Corporation, to explore for oil and gas in a 25,000 sq km area that includes the Spratly Islands. Chestone Chairman Randall Thompson said China has promised to protect the oil exploration venture with its own naval power.

This has raised the possibility of yet another armed clash between China and Vietnam, which has also been busy leasing out oil exploration areas in the disputed area to Asian, European and Australian firms.

Hanoi has already demanded that Beijing rescind the joint-venture agreement with Chestone, claiming the concession area lies within its maritime territory. China and Vietnam fought a brief naval battle in the Spratly Islands in 1988. The Chinese reportedly sank three Vietnamese supply

ships, killing about 70 Vietnamese sailors. China's steady gains in modernising its air and naval forces have given it more muscle to protect its South China Sea interests. To Taiwan's chagrin, it has bought 24 Russian-made SU-27 fighter aircraft, due for delivery late this year. Indications

are China will buy more top-of-the-line Russian aircraft like the Mig-29.

Analysts say the Chinese have already acquired mid-air refuelling capabilities that would allow its fighters and bombers to operate effectively in the South China Sea. And ASEAN governments take seriously reports that Beijing is

shopping around for an aircraft carrier and other surplus warships of Russia and Ukraine.

"We don't think those reports are a fluke," Ortiz said. "They seem to reflect Beijing's intentions and should thus be taken seriously. The acquisition of an aircraft carrier would be a major escalation of China's military capabilities."

Analysts say tensions over the Spratlys have pumped fresh impetus to ASEAN's present efforts to modernise its armed forces. Worried by China's increased air and naval presence in the area, Malaysia last year bought 28 'Hawk' trainer and fighter aircraft from Britain in a US \$ 740 million deal. Kuala Lumpur was also negotiating for two missile patrol boats.

Singapore, which maintains ASEAN's most modern military is acquiring F-16 fighter jets from the United States and is upgrading its fleet of A-4 Super Skyhawks and F-4 Phantom jets.

Meanwhile, debt-burdened Philippines is desperate to modernise its dilapidated air force and navy. Philippine Air Force Chief Gen Loven Abadia has described the country's air defence capability as virtually nil, making the air force unable to assert Philippine claims in the Spratlys.

The United States and other major arms exporting countries are likely to welcome increased weapons buying by ASEAN. But even ASEAN's most ambitious arms build-up plans are unlikely to alter the imbalance of power between China and its neighbours.

The Institute of International Strategic Studies (IISS) estimates that in 1990, China's navy had 1,000 major and minor surface combat vessels, thrice the number of Vietnam and ASEAN's combined forces. China also had 93 submarines while ASEAN had two. China's air force, with 5,900 aircraft, was eight times as large.

This strategic imbalance virtually ensures ASEAN will favour continued US military presence in the region as a counterweight not only to China, but also pre-emptively to Japan.

Tokyo's passage of a new law authorising the limited overseas deployment of its military forces has revived concerns in ASEAN over Japan's long-term strategic intentions.

Analysts say a dispute over oil resources in the South China Sea is one scenario that may invite Japanese military intervention in the future.

Japanese companies have been outbidding Western firms for offshore oil rights granted by Vietnam in the South China Sea in recent months in what oil industry experts say is a 'big push' to secure oil reserves close to home.

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.

Rickshaw puller

Sir, A few months back, one write-up under the title "Rickshaw-puller" by Parveen Anam appeared in your esteemed daily. I read the write-up through and through. I felt highly pleased that she wrote it with all of her heart and sympathy for rickshaw-pullers. In the write-up, rickshaw-pullers should be given a bit dignity too so says Parveen Anam. She rightly said it in favour of the rickshaw-pullers as they deserve a little respect as human beings — the greatest creation of God. It is often seen that we address our poor rickshaw-pullers as 'Tul', 'Tumi' even when they are older than us, which Islam doesn't support.

Our such attitude towards rickshaw-pullers needs to be changed. We should remember that they are also men like us. God says, 'Treat others as you expect to be treated by them.' We hate rickshaw-pullers for being poor and uneducated and also for because of their profession. But we should keep in mind that they are not responsible for this. Should they be given better employment than the present one, they would have left this profession. We ought to remember that they earn their livelihood by honest means.

On the other hand, there are a lot of people in our society who have built up their fortunes through dishonest way. But they are leading a dignified

life! A paradox indeed. It is regrettable that for being poor and uneducated, rickshaw-pullers are hated and neglected. Let us change our attitude and behave with them fairly, bearing in mind that though not all of them are good by nature but truly at least many of them are good-natured and well-behaved.

Md Delwar Hossain Dhaka

Tender for evaluation

Sir, Youth Development through Self-employment project of the Directorate of Youth Development is under implementation in seven upazilas. It was, however, supposed to be completed by 1991/92 financial year. At the end of May 1992, tenders were re-invited from specialist consulting firms to make evaluation and recommendations on how to make the programme self-reliant after completion of the above project, overall programme of the project, credit utilisation, income earned

through service charge, possible time frame for attaining socio-economic self-reliance of group members and evaluation of their overall poverty alleviation.

It may be noted that this was a retender. The previous tenders were cancelled due to lack of required response. We participated in the retender, and tenders of three firms, including ours, were considered valid according to regulations.

But it is a matter of great surprise and regret that our tenders have ultimately been rejected and the work has been awarded to another party having no relation with the participation in the tender. After the installation of the present democratically elected government we had expected that all decisions shall be based on rules and fairplay. But the above decision has been taken in a completely arbitrary manner, and our proposals prepared with mental and financial effort were rejected apparently without proper evaluation and we were unne-

cessarily harassed through the invitation of retender.

We are forced to take recourse to ventilate through your medium after failing to obtain any response to our complaints to the concerned authorities.

Dr Abdus Sattar Ace Data Products Tejgaon, Dhaka

Crime and punishment

Sir, We were delighted to read the news in the columns of your daily (22-10-92) regarding three persons being capitally sentenced for possessing illegal arms etc. etc.

Of late, we have been hearing of crimes of various degrees being committed frequently, and of people being arrested by the law enforcing agencies. But hardly do we know about their fate: are they actually tried? What punishments are awarded to them or are they released?

It would be nice of you to publish from time to time in a small corner of your columns stories of recent developments and the fate of those masts, miscreants involved in crimes, and thereby keep your readers informed.

Nasim Shaikh and Md Bashir Bjoynagar, Dhaka

Atanu

Sir, Do we really need to know more about Atanu (Ref: Oct 27, 1992 -letters)? The news on the very first day 'stank'. There are many Atanus who are really kidnapped/assaulted/maimed etc, but their fate go unnoticed and uncared for by us, the media and the law enforcing agency. However, when Sheikh Hasina visited the boy's house, the matter should have been closed then and there. But of course with such a vigilant police force and an equally sensitive media we can't expect that, can we?

Tanweerunnessa Dhanvandi, Dhaka