Dhaka, Tuesday, November 24, 1992

Listen to Shopkeepers

The shopkeepers of the city — and indeed the whole country - have long been trying to make a point. But till now to no avail. However, this time the message has been loud and clear. The message is that they have kept closed the city shops to make the government understand in what an overwhelming hostile climate business houses and even retail shops have to be run. Salesmen and shop-owners are both coming under attack of the dacolts and extortionists alike without any let-up. The killing of Rafiq Mia, a shopkeeper at New Market, has prompted the Federation of Bangladesh Shop-owners Association and Dhaka City Shop-owners Association to mobilise their members to protest the killing and also to give an ultimatum to the government for arrest of the killers by November 30 and their subsequent trial. If the demand is not met, the associations have threatened to go on a country-wide strike.

The government response so far has been unrecorded. It did so in the past also when Mona Bhai, a lovable businessman and sports organiser, was shot dead and many shopping centres remained closed as a mark of protest. This time, however, the shopkeepers seem to be more organised and determined to carry out their threat of bringing all commercial transactions to a halt. The government will be very naive not to read in the development something really ominous. When the shopkeepers voluntarily keep their establishments closed, this is no fun for them. rather it hurts and hurts terribly. The individual loss each of the shop-owners and their salesmen undergo may look not so big but the country's total is bound to be a staggering sum.

If the business community is bent on pressing for the point, the government's policy of following the ostrich that denies the existence of the storm by digging its head into the sand is no more going to help. What it should promptly recognise is that the warning issued by the trading people is in total contradiction of the government's big claim for improvement of the law and order situation. This again, in effect, is a clear negation of all the development efforts we can manage for the country. Whey businessmen are haunted by the all-pervading sense of insecurity, it is sheer madness to ask for industrial investment. Social peace and stability are a prerequisite for the economic growth. Without creating such a favourable environment, it is impossible to attract investors—both local and foreign.

Any government ignores this reality to its own peril. After all, for all countries in today's world it is the economy that acts as the barometer of the government's ability to govern. In a country like ours, we have the added task of removing the negative impact of the long years of dictatorial regimes. True, democracy cannot 'deliver' overnight, but at least the starting point must show why it is better than the previous autocratic system. If the law and order situation continues to deteriorate, rather than getting improved, a deep frustration sets in, leaving a not so positive influence on all areas of life.

The desperation of the shopkeepers has almost forced them to opt for a course of public action. Some of the voices raised at the rally held by the shopkeepers in front of the Jatiya Press Club have been too militant for our liking. The contentious issue is non-payment of the Value Added Tax (VAT). Again, there is a point. If the government fails to provide the security to the shopkeepers, they have to look for their own arrangement of the same. This will cost money and, as the speakers claim, they will feel no obligation to pay the VAT. Surely a dangerous line. And we disagree with it completely. However, this is because of the failure to contain the terrorists and extortionists. It is time the government gave a serious thought to the matter and came out with a workable formula by which, with active cooperation from the shopkeepers, it could do away with extortion.

NSU: A Bold Initiative

After years of planning and months of lobbying, not to speak of the hundreds of hours spent in processing the files through the dark alleys of our bureaucratic maze, the North South University (NSU) has finally received official permission to start operation from January 1993. It is indeed a major development in the area of specialised studies and is likely to have a far-reaching impact on the development of higher education in Bangladesh. We would like to congratulate the initiators, the sponsors and the financiers who had the vision and the courage to start something new in this country. As the first degree awarding private university the NSU will provide degrees in all branches of arts and sciences. But for the moment it plans to start with three schools. namely that of arts and social sciences; business with concentration on banking management, finance and marketing; and finally computer. It will also provide a masters programme in economics.

There are numerous reasons why we needed private universities as alternatives to the existing system of higher education. First and foremost reason is the gradual loss of quality of education in the established universities including the most famous one, the Dhaka University. Failure to keep pace with the growth of knowledge and development of subjects and the emergence of new areas of specialisation made our existing universities quite out of tune with the rest of the world. Then there is the fact of politicization of our higher seats of learning that perhaps did the most damage to our universities. Years of backlog leading to what we have come to call the "session jam" requiring six to seven years to complete a three or four years course - has made our higher education a journey into the unknown.

It is heartening to note the quality of the faculty that the NSU has been able to line up. Its collaboration with the various world famous universities from the USA and its international advisory board which consists of scholars from Harvard, Smithsonian Institution, Brown University, George Washington University and University of Illinois will no doubt ensure a very high quality of education in our own country. This will help, we hope, to stem the tide of our best and the brightest students going abroad for studies. Instead they will study here and help build a

centre of excellence in our own country. We would like to wish all the success to the NSU which, like everything new, has a lot of sceptics and critics. Our advice will be to ignore all those who say it cannot be done. It can be, and NSU will hopefully show the way.

A VIEW FROM THE OTHER SIDE

West Bengal Seeks Closer Economic Ties with Bangladesh

ALCUTTA — In the continuing stresses and strains which mark the Dhaka-Delhi relations today, Bangladesh may regard the people and the state administration of West Bengal as the "other side" only in a limited sense. This is about the first lesson a visiting journalist from Dhaka learns from his conversations with local newsmen.

Deliberately or otherwise, but not without obvious sincerity, they take an even-handed position on New Delhi's current "push-out" drive of the so-called illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and on the need for a just settlement of the water issue. They show their unqualified appreciation for the pro-democracy struggle of the people of Bangladesh which led to the fall of the Ershad regime. At the same time, these journalists who monitor the public opinion carefully appear worried about the divisive trends in Bangladesh politics, about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and about the ability of the Government of Begum Khaleda Zia to handle effectively the formidable problems facing the country.

The perception among the educated elite here of the performance of the BNP administration is based on concern, even some sympathy, rather than on criticism. This is, at least partly, because the Left Front West Bengal state government, now in its 15th year in office, too faces a whole range of challenges, from deterioration of law and order to divisive trends in its ranks, from the stalemate over the Babri Mosque issue fuelling Hindu communalism right across northern India to the unease in its border districts caused by New Delhi's drive against the so-called immigrants who, as a journalist friend puts it, "are largely long-time residents of India, holding ration cards and serving as vote banks of one political party or another."

On the last-named issue - New Delhi's "push-out" drive - one hears a few refreshingly candid views, generally critical of the Central Government, some of which have been reflected in the columns of an important section of the press in Calcutta, especially of the Ananda Bazar Patrika. One assumes that New Delhi alerted Calcutta on its policy before it was put into effect, perhaps only in general terms. After all, how could some Indians from

such border districts as Nadia and Murshidabad be evicted from their homes without the knowledge of the local administration? However, what bothered - in a way, angered — the state administration and the media is the absence of verification of nationality of victims of the drive in cooperation with Dhaka and Calcutta, the lack of prior consultation with the Government of Bangladesh and, finally, about the inhuman treatment meted out to those who got caught in the net.

Earlier this week, The Telegraph, the stable companion of the Ananda Bazar Patrika carried a regular column of one of the most respected journalists, Nikhil Chakravarty, this one

walking along the corridor together with a detailed report, was seen by Basu as a major breakthrough in the relations between Calcutta and Dhaka. Therefore, he rightly assumed that this would create the necessary trust in Indo-Bangladesh relations for resolution of other outstanding bilateral problems and, what's more, for the promotion of closer economic relations between Dhaka and Calcutta. In principle, he is said to be in agreement with Bangladesh leaders he met in recent months that Dhaka must indeed sell more to West Bengal in order to reduce the trade gap. Unfortunately, his administration has so far done precious little to liberalise its import restrictions against our exports.

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entirely devoted to the subject, accompanied by a photograph of a group of women, old men and children sitting on the ground, guarded by a couple of Indian border police with guns! The caption mentioned the term, "neo-Nazi" in describing the situation. What's more, on Friday, one Arun Prokash Chatterjee of the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights moved a writ petition before the Calcutta High Court. It alleged that "a group of Bangladesh nationals was ill-treated and pushed back into Bangladesh after their heads were shaven by Border Security Force personnel." The Association regarded this as an "inhuman behaviour." The Judge rejected the petition with the observation that he could not take up the matter only on the basis of newspaper reports "unless newspapers concerned were made parties".

Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, a veteran farsighted politician by any standard, has other reasons for viewing the "push-out" drive as a negative development. The return of the Tin Bigha Corridor to Bangladesh, described as a "symbol of amity" by the New Delhi edition of The Statesman on Saturday, while the Calcutta daily. The Telegraph published a large photograph of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia

Instead, what West Bengal is interested in is securing transit facilities for its import-export trade through the ports of Chittagong and even Mongla to ease the pressure on the Port of Calcutta. If such an agreement is reached, experts here say, Bangladesh will earn a substantial fee, on a regular basis, which will help in reducing the balance of payment gap with India.

Then, there is the proposal for West Bengal

buying natural gas from Bangladesh. On this question, opinions among experts in Dhaka may well be divided. However, when asked if the Government of Begum Zia would be interested in looking at the proposal as an economic proposition, Finance Minister Saifur Rahman told a press conference during a recent stop-over in Calcutta that Bangladesh has just enough gas for its own consumption on a long-term basis, a clear hint that unless Bangladesh discovers more proven deposits, the question of selling this commodity to India would not arise. This is where the matter rests today. However, there remains a need to study the whole question in details, with statistics, data and reliable projections, not necessarily for making a deal with India but for our own understanding of what the country can do with it in its drive for sustainable economic development.

Meanwhile, experts in Dhaka and Calcutta keep looking for other options for raising the level of their economic co-operation. Unfortunately, prospects look somewhat

A recent visit to Dhaka by a delegation of the West Bengal Chamber of Commerce has evoked considerable interest among traders and industrialists in Calcutta. According to a well-placed source in our High Commission here, the delegation was particularly impressed by the Export Processing Zone in Chittagong as well as by substantive talks it had with leaders of our trade bodies in Bangladesh.

One hopes, there will be early follow-up actions, especially the setting up of a effective mechanism for identifying new areas of collaboration, including joint ventures.

While the Chief Minister remains committed to the promotion of private enterprises, but on a selective basis, there are hardliners among the ruling CPI(M) who take a more conservative line, in opposition to the new economic policy laid down by the Central Finance Minister, Dr Monmohan Singh. Almost the first question put to Singh by a journalist when he arrived here on Friday was, "Will you discuss your differences with the state administration on your policy issues?" The Finance Minister's reply was tactfully evasive. but not without a reference to the knowledge and experience of Jyoti Basu, the 77-year old life-long communist.

in a state where a number of industries, running with out-dated equipment and surplus unionised labour, and showing huge losses, there are inevitable talks of work stoppages, closure of plants and even flight of capital. Many of these fears may be exaggerated, but there are ominous signals. Basu who may well be serving his last term in office must, therefore, move fast in developing an outwardlooking economic policy. In this context, his approach to prospects of closer ties with Bangladesh, a country he views with some sentimental attachment, assumes considerable importance.

The second and concluding part of the report will appear tomorrow.

Referendum Disaster Teaches Politicians a Lesson

Clyde Sanger writes from Ottawa

To the politicians it all looked sensible enough. Ten provincial premiers and Prime

Minister Brian Mulroney happily agreed changes to the Canadian constitution. But then

they went to the people in a referendum. In a country which had not had a referendum for

HE political leaders of Canada have had a sharp lesson in what democracy means: you cannot control - or even predict what most people will do when they are asked to vote in a

referendum. Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and the ten provincial premiers thought they could. They will agreed on a set of changes to the Canadian constitution, which had something good for ever region, and happily signed their agreement in Charlottetown, the capital of the smallest province.

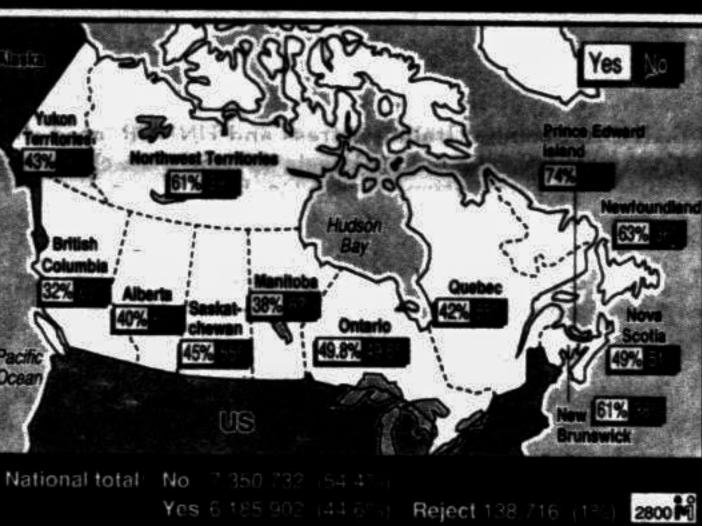
Then they decided to get public approval in a national referendum. They tough it would probably breeze through with about a 2 to 1 majority. Instead six provinces turned it down and in the overall vote 54 per cent of Canadian voters said No.

One reason why this happened was that Canadians, unlike Australians or Americans, are not used to referendums. It is exactly 50 years since the last national referendum, when Canadians were asked to say whether their young men could be conscripted for the armed forces in World War Two.

So the politicians tended to think people would act as the do in an ordinary election. In Canada there are usually three parties - Conservatives, Liberals and New Democrats and most people stick loyally to one of these parties for many years. A few thousand floating voters produce the change of government.

50 years the voters felt confused. Their No gave the politicians a sharp lesson.

How Canada said No



It did not happen this way on October 26. The federal leaders of all three parties lined up on-the Yes side, and so did all the premiers who again are from all three parties. They also had lots of moncy for the campaign, and plenty of communications experts with slick ideas for television advertisements.

Someone was so confident of the positive result that an education trust brought a dozen black political scientists

over from South Africa to witness the campaign.

The No forces started off with strength in Quebec, where about one-third of the voters would like to separate from the rest of Canada. But elsewhere they had only Preston Manning in Alberta, the leader of the recently formed Reform Party, and a couple of minor opposition leaders in other western provinces.

eastward from provinces and

Manning has an old fashioned style and a dull voice. But he plugged away with a simple message that appealed to older voters: the Charlottetown deal would be thousand crosses. expensive, it would require Quebec voted 55 per cent more government officials.

He called it "Mulroney's deal", and suggested that, if the No side won, the unpopular prime minister would resign. "For the love of Canada, vote No."

The flamboyant Mulroney played into his hands. He rushed everywhere possible across Canada (some premiers warned him off) and made dramatic speeches warning that a No victory could well lead to the country's break-up, with Quebec voting later for political sovereignty. The Canadian dollar fell in world markets, but Canadian voters just shrugged.

Then a tidal wave of No feeling seemed to sweep British Columbia, covering the prairie drowning the largest Englishspeaking province, Ontario Three of the four western

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provinces exceeded a 60 per cent No, as did the native indian people who asked to be counted separately. Ontario just voted Yes by a few

No, a smaller figure than expected. Premier Robert Bourassa, who was criticised for not negotiating toughly enough for his province, came out strongly for continued federalism when he heard the results. He does not have to face a vote on sovereignty until he calls a provincial election, probably in two years. He thinks he can win an election on that issue, for separatist numbers have gone down

All sorts of reasons led people to voting No. it seems Many western Canadians thought Quebec was getting too much out of the deal. Farmers had a bad harvest. workers were losing jobs through free trade with the United States, some others thought the agreement too complicated or worried what self-government for Canada's native people would mean in

A big surprise came for Chief Ovide Mercredi, head of Assembly of First Nations, when nearly two-thirds of the Indian people living on reserves voted No. They just didn't trust the government. apparently.

However, a number of premiers have said they will go ahead to settle land claims and help First Nations, whether Inuit or Indian, take over the administration of their own communities.

As well, some transfer of powers from Ottawa to the provinces can be done without any constitutional change. But the Senate, now filled with elderly appointees of government, will not be reformed. The Charlottetown agreement is a wreck, but part of it will be

salvaged. Mulroney may go down with his ship, though not immediately. He has won two elections for his Conservatives, but the people's revolt in the referendum showed he is a liability, and the party may seek another leader before the next election, due in a year's time. - GEMINI NEWS

CLYDE SANGER is a former Director of Information at the Commonwealth Secretariat and author of several books, the most recent on the Law of the Sea. A journalist in Britain, Africa and at the UN, he has lived in Canada since 1967.

Sangsad, PDB and VAT

Sir, My previous letter on curtailing the privileges of the MPs in proportion to their attendance was half in jest. The trend of boycott and the activities in the streets should make us re-consider, seriously if we need the Jatiya Sangsad at all.

The opposition had given us the idea of a one party State, even though they themselves are not at the helm. So what do we do with the huge white elephant? Perhaps, it could be turned into a convenient exclusive club for well-heeled MPs, who have to hire out entire local stadia for their wedding receptions.

The PDB is at it again. Small

consumers (the larger ones usually provide their bread and butter) are being threatened with disconnection for decadeold dues, real and imaginary. Money is, literally, extorted even when PDB billing is at fault. "Pay up or sit in the dark", they say; which we all are doing anyway because of the 'load shedding' presently prevalent all over Chittagong for hours on end. No one asks them where they were all these years ? Are the PDB staff being 'rewarded' for this extortion and for 'reducing' the systems loss, which actually means merely robbing a little less from the national grid? This must surely be the last straw!

VAT, I am told, means Value Added Tax. I use my phone very sparingly to chat

with a few friends or to know the welfare of my family. Can anyone tell me where 'value' is being 'added' and why I should be 'taxed' for this, the most

Quazi Akhlaque-uz Azeem Anderkilla, Chittagong

natural of functions?

Taxes

Sir, Thanks (though belated) to Mr O H Kabir for his letter "Budget X-rayed" (The Daily Star 1.7. 92). Whatever he has said is commendable. Mr Kabir, analysing the different aspects of the country's financial conditions, requested the Finance Minister to enlighten the public as to what measures he would suggest or take to solve the financial problems faced by the country. So far, we have not come

across anything very viable. The increase in rates and duties and taxes of utility services, in the past, used to be brought in the form of a bill and had to undergo a process of scrutiny and approval. For some years past, taxes are imposed and raised at the sweet will of some Government Departments. During the last half of autocratic regime the rates of raising taxes were exorbitant. During the last budget, the Finance Minister claimed that government was free to impose and increase taxes any time and it needed no approval of Sangsad.

General people being hard pressed by repeated tax increases had earnestly hoped that the democratic government would at least give them some relief by withdrawing the

last increase on taxes. But to their dismay they have now further increase of rates of gas

Will the government kindly frame a standard policy to examine the pros and cons of people's ability so that any further increase in rates and charges may be kept in abeyance at least for five years.

and WASA by this govt.

Md A Sattar Motijheel, Dhaka

Rate of interest

Sir, The government is reducing the rates of interest on bank deposits and various Savings or Defence Certificates as many of the bank loans have become bad investments. Most of the sector corporations have failed to repay the principal bank loan amount leaving aside the question of interest pay-

Dozens of enterprises of sector corporations could not earn enough money through sale of goods and services to clear the wages, salaries and benefits payable to the employees. To avoid labour unrest, bank borrowings by those enterprises are recurrent.

Against the backdrop how the old retired employees of non-pensionable jobs, or self employed persons, will survive if the rate of interest on the bank deposits or savings certificates are lowered so frequently?

Sadiq Alee Moghbazar, Dhaka

Dr Kamal Hossain and 'Third Force' dividing the most popular I have great respect for Dr party in this critical period of time. The crying need of the

division and weakness.

Kamal Hossain. He holds a prestigious position as a jurist, political economist and a politician of moderate opinion. He is revered as a trusted lieutenant of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a framer of the '72 Constitutional and many other laudable contributions to the country. He earned reputation not by vain ostentation of his erudition and learning but by diligence and honesty. With all these said, it is, however, true that he has no capability to shine all alone in the arena of Bangladesh poli-

His contribution to politics under Bangabandhu is innumerable but as a loner he, unfortunately, holds no ground. He is liked and loved by the intelligentsia for his moderate thoughts but he has yet to prove himself as a popular figure among the masses and in public meetings. He rarely speaks in the language of the people. He is more a recluse and should not try to emulate a mass leader. He has no experience of skulduggery usually required of a politician of a developing country and cannot move a single voter even if he is given the fulcrum. Politics is fraught with many obstacles and vicissitudes which he can neither blink nor face. He dithers in crisis and cannot muster strength to forbear, circumvent and pulverise opponent. A man of his knowledge, experience and honesty is an asset for a party and more for the country as an advisor rather than a partisan.

I bow my head to him in reverence but cannot congratulate him in his role of time is unity and strength to consolidate democracy not

He is critical of the action

of Shiekh Hasina, who happens to lead the party. As a people's party emerging from and rooted to the people it has taken in it's fold leaders and politicians of different outlooks attitudes and opinions. It behoves its leader to unite the difference and turn it into a single strong unit. In doing so the leader has to exercise discretion to lead the party to a particular direction. This action can in no case be termed as autocratic as it has been approved by the council. It is the duty of other leaders to support and go along with the decision or remain passive till holding of the next council for greater interest of healthy politics. By denouncing the leader by issuing statements Dr Kamal, I am afraid, failed to identify himself to be a part of the greater whole, in this case unity, and cannot exculpate himself from the charge of creating confusion and divi-

The so called 'third force' is a conglomeration of dissatisfied and distillusioned politicians rather than a united force. How this force will be different from AL, BNP or other factions? It has, so far, failed to come out with any political and economic programme distinguishable from the programmes of other parties. Country and the nation is in deep problems and dancing to the tune set by the so called leaders and honors. People are

burdened with taxes on the one hand and abysmal poverty on the other. Large scale unemployment, disillusioned youth force, weak administration and degenerated values eating into the vital of the nation. Corruption is rampant and growing in geometric progression. Education and learning is a thing of the past. Land administration is contributing to aggravated landlessness. Has the 'third force' come up with any programme and time schedule to combat and improve the situation?

The third force, in my opinion, just a meandering of the main stream, an eye wash of the old and hackneyed ideas meaning nothing. In fact he is making adversaries stronger and friends weaker. This is not expected of him. Why doesn't he devote time to launch a 'Voodan' or 'cooperative' movement to ameliorate the fate of landless and uprooted million? If he has time to take drastic action to divide an established party to provide a platform for dissatisfied groups, why not use that time to strengthen the party he belongs?

By creating a 'third force' of dissident groups he will only dissipate his own energies and forfeit people's confidence and in no time his name and reputation will pass into oblivion. His launching of the third force will put the nascent democracy in jeopardy and harm the nation. There is still time for him

to think and act.

Syed Siddique Hossain Dhanmandi R/A, Dhaka