

An Affront to NAM

If Japanese press reports are correct, President Suharto of Indonesia, the current head of the 108-nation Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), will not receive an invitation to attend the post-summit meeting with leaders of G-7, the world's richest seven nations, scheduled to be held in Tokyo on July 7-9.

Oddly enough, it was Suharto himself who had told the visiting Japanese Prime Minister, Kiichi Miyazawa earlier this month that he hoped to attend a post G-7 session. In short, a polite request from a leader of international stature, representing the largest single block of nations, has been turned down.

We see the G-7's unwillingness, if not an outright refusal, to invite Suharto to Tokyo as an affront to NAM. In the first place, several industrialised countries, such as Japan, Australia and the United States, always get invited to the post-summit meeting of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). So, at least for the sake of reciprocity, G-7 should have been prompt in responding positively to the Indonesian leader's request for an invitation to Tokyo.

A meeting between the current chairman of NAM and leaders of G-7 would have indeed served a most useful purpose, even if it was held outside the formal summit. There are issues and problems in the North-South relations which need to be addressed by the industrialised nations as well as the Third World. They range from the stalemate in the Uruguay Round to uncertainties in investments and aid. Some of these problems have grown increasingly complex mainly due to the failure of the industrialised nations to give a high priority to these issues as well as to the inability of NAM to present its viewpoints with necessary vigour, cohesion and earnestness.

Clearly, most countries in Africa are heading for inevitable economic stagnation, mass starvation and unbearable human tragedy. Here are six key structural problems challenging black Africa today. First, Africa's population, which grows at an alarming rate of 3.1%, is the greatest

There is still time for G-7 reversing its position on the question of inviting Suharto to Tokyo. However, it is doubtful if the Indonesian leader will agree to come to the Japanese capital, having once been told to stay away from it. What a pity.

Madhusudan and the Literary Doldrums

On Monday at Sagardanri, in Jessore, commenced the Modhu Mela—a fair celebrating the 170th birth anniversary of the great nineteenth century poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt. With one mighty heave this genius of a man pushed medieval Bengal into a modernity— aesthetic and socio-religious, that were subsequently to be consummated by Rabindranath in a far better way than Eliot, the neophyte Catholic revivalist. As time passes and we have a better perspective of times past, Tagore grows in modernistic stature, what with his paintings and songs, well beyond the young turks who tried to sing a very different tune enriching Bengali poetry by the way. And Madhusudan, denounced by Tagore in his teens and repenting that in his dying days, grows too as truly presaging the universalism and humanism that were to form the temper of our literature for the better of a century starting with the first publications of Dutt. Modhu Mela is a good way to commemorate Michael but a very bucolic way too. This goes well with the return of the medieval and the provincial in our literature and the arts—perhaps in the whole psyche of the Bengalee people, not long after the passing of Tagore.

Madhusudan was indeed Derouzo. The Young Bengal guru, surviving to wonderful fruition albeit bleeding all through falling on the thorns of life. Both arrived at an abiding passion for things and people native through their won and long and virulent rejection of the same. Madhusudan was a world-man discovering very lovingly his subcontinental, in fact Bengalee, roots and bringing the cullings of his sojourn abroad to adorn a poorly mother left at home. The best of those cullings was a different way of looking at society and its myths, culture, and the arts and on the whole the human phenomenon.

It is very significant that beside the Modhu Mela—a village fair with its nagore-dolas and lathi-khetas and cheap rustic goodies—the academic and literary arenas entrenched in the cities and full with heroic gladiators jousting each other relentlessly, have earned little to remember the man who gave a damn to barriers created between man and man by religion and sex, clime and culture and was libertarian to the point of being fanatically non-conformist. He was in his times the man of the ages ahead. He still remains a man of tomorrow. And an artist never excelled.

We have we think earned a right to vanity in things related to the proscenium theatre. Plays were decidedly a Madhusudan forte and each of his immortal four— specially 'Buro Shaliker Gharey Roun'— so rewardingly revived by Nagarik in the early seventies, could be offered as a lither remembrance of the one who gave all of us so much. Madhusudan's commemoration speaks amply of the literary and cultural doldrums we are in—and the lack of any remembrance of Mir Mularraf Hossain says there is no sign we shall get out of it soon.

Mosque Demolition Imperils India's Economic Reforms

IT'S not business as usual for policy-making bureaucrats, captains of industry and heads of chambers of commerce.

It was Black Sunday in early December when frenzied Hindu mobs demolished the historic Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, north India. It will have repercussions well into 1993 for the rest of the country, and even the subcontinent.

Most people now fear economic chaos if the Narasimha Rao government is unable to control the law and order situation, push back rioters and create a sense of confidence among hundreds of millions of people.

"Maintaining law and order is the first and most important priority. Everything else, including economic reforms, can wait," a highly-placed official says.

The communal crisis will certainly affect the business climate, particularly at a time when India was moving towards liberalisation," says Ratan Tata, chairman of Tata Sons, India's biggest corporate company. "The world is going to look at India as an unstable country and efforts made to globalise India will be shattered."

"Civil strife at this stage

would be extremely costly and harmful, no one can afford it," says Dr J J Irani, president of the Confederation of Indian Industry.

Dr Irani notes that India has impressed many foreign investors over the past 16 months through its policies of economic reforms, liberalisation and deregulation. "The nation must continue its priority focus on the economy so as to retain the confidence of the world business and financial community," he says.

The present uncertainty, for instance, will be reflected in negotiations with major creditors. India has sought about US\$ 9 billion from the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank for a three-year period beginning April, 1993 to meet the country's balance of payments. This requires India's acceptance of a rigorous policy prescription which only a politically stable government can give.

West European diplomats point out the communal tension could scare away potential investors. Some say if Prime Minister Rao goes under party pressure, it will be a disaster. "He is the symbol of economic reforms and liberalisation. It

Prakash Chandra writes from New Delhi

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will be a major setback to the economy if the government falls," says a Western diplomat.

Some diplomats are also worried about the communal flare-ups not only in India but also in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Others are wary of a backlash in the Muslim world.

There will be a big crisis if the oil-exporting countries, which are primarily Muslim in the Arab world, take a negative stand towards India," says an industrialist. India buys 5 million tons of crude from Saudi Arabia, 4 million tons from Kuwait, 3 million tons from Iran and smaller quantities from other countries in the region.

While industrialists remain stunned by the Ayodhya disaster, a quick survey of businessmen and policy-makers reveals that economic issues have been pushed into the background. "We were expecting major announcements regarding changes in the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act and a few policy decisions regarding

banking during the current session of Parliament," a senior banker says. "This is unlikely to happen."

A notable casualty of the Ayodhya disaster is the Joint Parliamentary Committee which was probing the financial scam involving billions of rupees, American and Indian banks and wealthy brokers. This committee may not meet at all, at least for some time until the political crisis is resolved.

Other major programmes which may be shelved or put on the back burner are the following:

All-important strategy for financial reforms, which attracted the attention of the opposition parties for their fear of privatisation, now appears "beside the point". The banks were supposed to be given access to the domestic capital market to raise funds for shoring up their own funds base.

A comprehensive bill to

amend the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA) was scheduled to be introduced in the current session of Parliament. The bill, when passed, would give statutory sanction to various notifications issued by the Reserve Bank of India from time to time to liberalise the exchange control regime.

The Cabinet has cleared the bill. Foreign investors were also keen that such statutory sanction is provided. But now with the Ayodhya developments taking precedence over everything else in Parliament, there is no likelihood of the bill being introduced during the current session.

Similarly, the discussion on constitutional amendment bills had begun and the government agreed to incorporate the views of opposition leaders in the bill. But official sources now say there is little chance that parliament will resume discussion of these bills, which were aimed at bringing about changes in rural and urban areas.

While Narasimha Rao as former Industry Minister was moving swiftly towards delicensing industries, he as the Prime Minister could not take any decision because of his preoccupation with Ayodhya.

Sometime in mid-October files for delicensing the car, consumer electronic products, beer and alcohol, and cigarette industries—moved over from the Industry Ministry to the steering committee in the Prime Minister's office.

The proposal for sugar delicensing was also sent to the Prime Minister's office in November after the Industry Ministry cleared it. Though the steering committee met on a couple of occasions, it could not devote any attention to delicensing.

At present there are 18 industries which require licensing. Excepting four, all others are proposed to be delicensed. The field which would continue to require licence include petroleum, aerospace and defence equipment, raw hides and skins and tanned fur skins.

It is now expected that the Prime Minister's hearing for delicensing would not take place in the near future. Hence, it is not only the present reforms adversely affected by the communal unrest—there will also be a considerable slowdown in the pace of future reforms. — Depthnews Asia

Africa: A Continent in Crisis

by Abu K. Selimuddin

IRONICALLY, Africa has been neglected by the Western diplomats, ignored by Economic historians and patronized by politicians for decades. Many in the West have acquired their first notion about Africa from Hollywood's Tarzan movies in which black Africans are depicted almost always as bad guys. What's more, policies of United States toward Africa today have remained focused on just three countries: South Africa, Egypt and Libya. The vast majority of other African countries which lie in between have received little or no serious international attention, except, of late, Somalia.

Clearly, most countries in Africa are heading for inevitable economic stagnation, mass starvation and unbearable human tragedy. Here are six key structural problems challenging black Africa today. First, Africa's population, which grows at an alarming rate of 3.1%, is the greatest

single constraint to its long-term economic growth and improvement of human welfare. Certainly, if the present population growth continues, Africa will triple its population by the year 2030. Admittedly, droughts and insufficient rainfall is Africa's number one enemy. According to one UN estimate, agricultural production for the whole of Africa, having grown by 2.8% in 1989, was virtually stagnant during 1990-91. To make matters worse, total food production increased very little, perhaps less than half a percentage point which is turning Africa into a net food importing continent and threatening the continent by a large-scale famine.

Second, Africa's woeful lack of resources to devote to education, healthcare and infrastructure handicaps its ability to grow. As a consequence, many

economies in Africa are shrinking and their abilities to recover the lost ground are diminishing. The World Bank, for instance, has recently reclassified six African countries from "middle-income" to "low-income" status.

Third, Africa's slow growth of farm products has caused export earnings to decline which, in turn, has led to a chronic shortage of foreign exchange. For lack of foreign exchange, Africa is forced to take staggering foreign debts which act as drags on the economy. In 1990, for instance, the debt service absorbed about 30% of Africa's export earnings.

Fourth, Africa's public spending, which accounts for 30% of GNP, is higher than average poor countries outside Africa. Africa's debt-financed

public spending is inflationary which appreciates currency value. Recurring inflation and currency overvaluation discourages exports and encourages imports, causing the huge trade deficit, most of which is financed by borrowed funds.

Fifth, governments in many African countries are not only incompetent economic managers, they are also corrupt. Bribes become a part of cost of doing business in Africa. Further, historical policies of colonial exploitation have surely played a role, as have the present-day mistakes and mismanagement by African governments.

Sixth, the accelerating degradation of one of Africa's greatest economic resources—its natural resource base—aggravates the above-stated prob-

lems and makes it very difficult to overcome Africa's inevitable stagnation and mass starvation.

Africa's rapidly deteriorating economy due to overpopulation has ravaged the environment, turned cropland into desert, robbed remaining arable land of its productive capacity, converted the continent into a net grain importing region and left millions of hungry Africans physically weakened, drained of their vitality and productivity.

Africa needs to pursue the following policies to turnaround the economy. First, have national population policies to deal with uncontrolled population growth rate which is making Africa's economic problems dramatically worse by diluting the salvaging effect of foreign development assis-

stance. Second, allow more market and less government-guided policies for efficient resource allocation; subsidy to inefficient economic activities should be done away with.

Third, avoid inflationary methods of public financing by cutting budget deficits. Fourth, reorder spending priorities in favour of building human capital and physical infrastructure for long-term economic growth, e.g. more resources for primary education, health-care, roads and bridges. Fifth, downsize those inefficient government-run organizations by eliminating overstaffing and large-scale inefficiencies.

Africa can't face its economic crisis alone. It needs continued support from the world community. Unless Africa finds a way to conquer hunger, its economic doom spawned by rapid population growth, will be a primary cause behind civil strife and rise of authoritarian governments.

A Modern-day Slay of Innocents

Death squads are killing hundreds of Brazil's street children. Ricardo de Bittencourt of IPS reports from Rio de Janeiro.

A few days after Christmas each year, many Catholic countries still observe the 'Day of the Innocents', marking the slaying of male children by soldiers of King Herod who was after the Christ Child.

But researchers in two cities here say Brazil seems to be having a modern-day version of the gory event, with about 100 children murdered each month in the streets of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo by 'extermination squads'.

This time though, there is no king bent on killing a baby believed to be the Messiah—only self-styled vigilantes who want to 'clean up the city'.

The execution of children in this South American nation has taken on unprecedented proportions, increasing by an estimated 70 percent in the past twelve months, according to Sao Paulo University's Unit for Studies on Violence and the Centre on Marginalized Populations (CEAP) of Rio de Janeiro.

The two research institutes

put the average number of children assassinated each month in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo at 60 and 40 respectively.

But while children run the greatest risk of being executed in these two cities and in Recife, they also face violent deaths in every other major Brazilian city.

No one knows the exact number of children killed by death squads throughout the country. Researchers feel official figures, where they exist, mask the true magnitude of the problem.

A report compiled by Rio de Janeiro's civilian police states 306 minors suffered violent deaths in 1991 in that city. It also mentions that there were 141 cases of 'corpses found', 136 cases of 'attempted homicide' followed by death and 89 'suspicious deaths'.

Even if only half the other deaths related to minors, that would bring the total to 489

for Rio de Janeiro alone. Consulted by IPS, the civilian police's social communication unit failed to explain what was meant by 'attempted homicide'.

Failure by the authorities to take adequate steps to curb the violence against street children has sparked much concern here.

Rio de Janeiro official Paulo Mello said a parliamentary commission that concluded an investigation on the city's death squads in December 1991, "found that thousands of minors had died and that there were 15 groups of exterminators."

"We passed on our findings to the justice authorities. So

far nothing has happened," added Mello, who headed the commission.

He asked the public prosecutor's office for reports on the measures adopted to protect minors, "but so far I have not received any response."

Indeed, many of Rio de Janeiro's middle class look askance at those who defend street children, whom they see as a threat. They argue that the children should be in school and not on the street.

Retorts Antonio Jose de Oliveira, provincial coordinator of the national movement of street children: "Why are they in the street and not in school? Because there are no schools for 300,000 children

in Rio de Janeiro."

Even when schools are found for street children, there is "a long sequence of repeated failures because the programmes are conceived for another cultural universe, that of the middle class," he argued.

Brazil's economic crisis and the attendant unemployment, the disintegration of families, the housing shortage and the lack of schools are among the factors blamed for the existence of bands of children who sell sweets and trinkets, beg alms, steal and sleep in the streets.

The Institute of Geography and Statistics, a state body, estimated the number of street children throughout Brazil at seven million in 1986. Since then, the socio-economic crisis has worsened, leading many to believe there are now more children roaming the streets.

As the children move from place to place—sometimes to escape from extermination squads and at other times to seek opportunities in other neighbourhoods—authorities are having great difficulty coming up with a precise number on their population.

Even the figures on child deaths vary greatly. While the Rio de Janeiro police reported that 171 minors died violent deaths in that city in the first half of 1992, a child and juvenile court there put the number at 277, including 29 girls and 13 children under the age of eleven years.

Based on the preliminary figures of a survey it conducted, the CEAP feels that over 600 children may have been murdered in 1992.

CEAP itself has become a target, with unidentified gunmen recently firing shots at its office. CEAP executive secretary Ivanir dos Santos has also received death threats from persons who identified themselves as members of the 'National Group for the Protection of the Society' and the 'Group for a Society without Marginals'.

The two organizations have accused dos Santos of "insisting on defending those little marginals" and opposing the action of those who "want to ensure the tranquillity of our city".

According to Mello, the impunity with which these groups operate generates fears for the future of the children and adolescents who, unprotected, face the increasingly arduous task of surviving in the street.

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.

Pronunciation of names

Sir, I happened to go through a letter published in a Bangla daily recently. It made some interesting reflections (if not revelations) regarding the standard of newscasting in TVT with special reference to foreign names (both of persons and places) and their pronunciations by most newscasters.

Indeed as far as foreign names are concerned, it looks as though TV authorities have granted the newscasters absolute freedom to pronounce those in whatever they like. It is true that TVT news bulletins are badly drafted and poorly edited, but the weakness in drafting and editing cannot be an excuse for mispronunciation of names of personalities who regularly hit the headlines. For instance, newscaster read 'Milosevic' as 'Malosevic' on 30th December 8 o'clock bulletin. In the same bulletin she pronounced West Indian cricketer Philip Simmons as 'Philip Simpson' and Australian leg spinner 'Shane Warne' as 'Shont Warney'. I am sorry, I cannot tell you how she pronounced the names of the Czech, Russian, Polish and Rumanian football teams participating in the President's Gold Cup, because those were simply incomprehensible. On

the night of 3rd January the same newscaster read Andrei Kozzyrov as 'Kozzyrov' and so on and so forth.

Names are very much part of the news and inability to read them properly is tantamount to miscommunication. Leaving aside all other considerations, at least courtesy demands that they are pronounced correctly. If necessary, the newscasters should be trained. After all, the TV authorities, in the process, embarrass the knowledgeable public.

Golan Kabir Malibagh, Dhaka

Education

Sir, We always say in seminars, public meetings and in other functions that we need to educate our people for achieving our desired developmental goals and expected prosperity. The government has also made primary education compulsory for all.

But the real picture is rather very gloomy. Those parents who even under serious hardship try to keep on with their wards' education, are increasingly finding it difficult to admit their children to private and government schools. The tuition fees of the private schools are too high while the government schools can ac-

commodate only a few students; the competition is very tough.

In order to achieve success of education for all programme by the year 2000, setting up of educational institutions in the private sector is indispensably essential, but private institutions should not be turned into commercial business houses to trade on education.

We would urge upon the government to create certain organizational set-up to control the activities of the private educational institutions and to maintain the standard of education. At the same time, the number of seats and shifts in the government schools should be raised. The prime aim of school education has to be confined to perpetuating moral standards and fundamentals while the purpose of higher education should be restricted to building up productive manpower.

M Zahidul Haque Assistant Professor Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka

British-Bangla co-operation

Sir, Dhaka is growing as a strong transit point for drug trafficking and Britain seeks Bangladesh's co-operation in combating the outlawed practice. British Home Minister's disclosure during his recent visit to Bangladesh sounded an alarm prompting effective measures against the infectious vice.

His scheduled visit to Sylhet—original home of an overwhelming majority of Bangladeshis living in UK—

highlighted the purpose, as indicated beforehand, "to assess the situation how such a large number of people from this place come to live in Britain".

Britain's aids to Bangladesh have always been among the top ten totals of donor countries, such as USA, Japan, France, Germany, Canada, Australia, and Italy, owing mostly to the British colonial background of about two centuries that has entitled her to Commonwealth membership without British monarch as her head unlike a number of other Commonwealth states.

Although Bangladesh did not earn independence direct from British rule that was enforced in eastern India including undivided Bengal following defeat of the independent monarch of the region in 1757, most of the colonial system has traditionally been in force in this LDC.

Even after the gradual disintegration of British Empire into independent states, Great Britain can now boast the continued successes of 50-state strong Commonwealth (of former colonies) with as much pride as her so many inventions, pioneers, and world records.

Moreover, having had the capacities of one of the five superpowers and G-7 coupled with a major role in the progressing 12-nation (West) European Community along with the advantage of UN's first language and the global Standard Time has UK reasserted her leadership in the new world order.

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OPINION

Beefing up Barisal Division

The creation of the Barisal division should encourage the people of the division to dedicate themselves to some major uplift programmes, and co-operate with the administration to make the daily life easier, and richer.

During the British period, the region was known as one of the granaries of undivided India; and could easily feed the whole of Bengal on rice. Therefore the present infrastructure could be easily improved to increase agricultural production.

The richness of the river and marine life in this deltaic region has to be developed properly to strengthen the economy of the division. To ensure proper working conditions, the operation of two vital services has to be greatly improved: communication and security.

Well known terrorist groups have been rampaging the division for many years, and the situation is not yet in full control of the administration; albeit there is a political side to it. The solution is simple on paper: the planning and operational efficiency of the law and order authority must be better than that of the miscreants—that is the meaning of deterrence.

The Coast Guard setup is

virtually non-existent, and there is hardly any evidence of the River Police. This coastal area is a hot smuggling zone via the water routes. A Master Plan is a must.

Barisal is also very much within the dreaded cyclone zone; with an additional menace: the tidal surges. Another disadvantage is the presence of many islands (and new ones coming up with the two billion tons of silt per annum) with poor and slow communication and transport services. It will take at least two 5-Year Plans to have the foundations in a satisfactory working condition.

The communication service must be all-wireless, backed with solar power supply (there is no shortage of sunshine in Bangladesh). The water transport system must be designed for the coastal areas; the river transport designs are different. At present there is no base for the former. Barisal can easily have a modern dockyard industry (years ago, some UN agency locally carried out experiments on the hull design of river craft).

The future of Barisal division looks bright, provided all get down to work seriously, without wasting time on political diversions.

A Mawaz Dhaka