

Ban on Child Labour Products: the Poor to Suffer

by Khursheed Erfan Ahmed

Global surveys show that child labour is not an uncommon phenomenon even in the developed western world. The "US National Safe Work Place Institute" in Chicago, has estimated child labour in the US at 5.5 m. with 6,76,000 kids working in the informal sector over which the government has no control.

welfare support and poor education systems. But the existence of child labour in more prosperous economies in spite of their claims to education and a welfare support system are difficult to explain. While the US Senate is to be congratulated for linking trade with human rights issues, the American people need to look towards into factors of child exploitation and rejection of education at primary and adolescent level.

US Trade Show

The US Trade Show which opens here today will, we hope, provide a boost to the economic relations between Dhaka and Washington, with the private sector playing a key role in this exercise.

On balance, the present picture is a mixed one. On the positive side, Bangladesh has a merchandise trade surplus with the United States in approaching a half a billion dollars per year, with its exports composed mostly of garments. However, the country's heavy reliance on one single product increases its vulnerability. We must, therefore, look for diversification and stay ahead of our competitors which are also developing their own garment industry, with increased emphasis on quality control and varieties. In contrast to our trade surplus, the US exports to Bangladesh for the past three years have been about \$180 million per year.

A major area of our concern is in the field of investment. On this score, Ambassador William B Milam of the United States has rightly observed that despite liberalisation of investment policy and a democratically-elected government being in office, very little investment, domestic or foreign, American or other, has been taking place in Bangladesh. As he recently put it before a meeting of the Rotary Club of Dhaka North, "a year and a half after it was published, the New Industrial Policy, which reaffirmed the government's desire to attract investment, has not produced any results."

Without saying so in public, the government here must indeed be concerned over what very much looks like a stagnation in the field of investment, serious enough to attract the attention of a foreign diplomat. The question is whether the administration has been looking into the reasons contributing to what we had recently described as a "dismal situation." We are not sure if such a study has been going on within the Finance Ministry.

Critics would say, it is very largely the question of confidence which the administration has not been able to generate among the investors. There is obviously some truth in this assertion. However, one could also argue that bitter political warfare which has been going on for past two years between the government and the opposition, with both sides exchanging all kinds of accusations, has caused serious erosion of public confidence in the system as a whole, rather than just in the government. While we would urge the government to take initiative in reducing political tension in the country, there is certainly a role to be played by the opposition to make investors believe in the future of Bangladesh or in the stability of the system. If by their actions and words, political parties succeed in scaring away investors, it is the country as a whole which will be the worst loser.

This being the case, it is not surprising that while Ambassador Milam has been expressing his concern over the situation, a visiting UN Under Secretary General, Rafiuddin Ahmed, the Executive Secretary of ESCAP has been talking of the need for a national consensus which alone would accelerate economic progress in the country, including the flow of investment. It is a pity that Bangladesh has been placed in such a situation that it should remain at the receiving end of worthwhile but embarrassing advices from foreign diplomats and visiting dignitaries. While this situation continues, even an otherwise successful US Trade Show would not achieve much in boosting our economic relations with the outside world.

Safe Drinking Water Fights Diseases

Not surprisingly, a survey on water carried out recently across Chittagong Division has come up with alarming results. Drinking water all over the division has been found to contain severely harmful bacteria. Water samples taken from as diverse and distant places as Sylhet, Comilla and Cox's Bazar have given readings from the lowest 10 to the highest 500 coliforms in 100 ml of water. Ideally though, more than two coliforms in the same amount of water are considered harmful for human consumption in this country; and the international standard is no coliform at all. Now the bacteria-filled water is responsible for spreading diseases like cholera, dysentery, diarrhoea, typhoid, para-typhoid etc. — the diseases people here are highly vulnerable to. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), about 80 per cent diseases here are categorised as water-borne.

This alarming piece of news has at least one saving grace in that the diseases are preventable by taking adequate measures to ensure safe drinking water. If efforts are concentrated on just one single area, chances are that about 80 per cent diseases will be kept at bay. This is a tremendous opportunity for us to wage a win-all war against so many common diseases at a single stroke. If the Directorate of Environment, Chittagong Division and the WHO are right, the major health service should be provided in the form of pure drinking water. There is no reason to think that the condition of drinking water in other four divisions is any better. In the south of the country, water poses a far greater risk to people's health. Diarrhoea has broken out on such a scale in some areas of Barisal and Patuakhali that veteran politician Mohiuddin Ahmed has to draw attention of all concerned to the dismal situation at a press conference in the city the other day.

Nor is this first time that the southern districts witness such serious outbreaks of diarrhoea and dysentery. One reason of this special vulnerability of the south to these disease is the use of canal water which is largely polluted by human excreta as people build open latrines on canals. Surely the answer to this problem lies in following some health rules by the people of the area themselves. At the same time adequate number of tube-wells have to be supplied to the vulnerable area. The UNICEF and NGOs known for their admirable job of tubewell distribution can indeed help the people there. As for the water with bacteria in the urban areas, it is the maintenance of the whole water supply facilities, including pipes and overhead tanks, and the method of water purification that need to be improved. There is no scope for making any excuse for not embarking on a programme for supplying nation-wide safe drinking water.

IN 1980 ILO estimated 88 million working children under 15 years — 16 m. in Africa, 68 m. in Asia and 3.5 m. in Latin America. Estimates of experts like Bhoudiba and Bequele suggest 145 m. to 200 m. working children in the world. The difference in these estimates is due to the age denominator restricting them to 10-15 years (ref: Doek E Jaap's paper "Child Abuse and Neglect" presented at a conference on "working children" in Thailand).

Not all the 200 m. children are exploited. At least not those who work in traditional and agricultural family occupations as apprentices and family members. Most of them, of course, remain deprived of education, health care and nutrition to which they have a right — a childhood need ratified globally by the UN Convention on the Rights of Children.

Many factors determine the incidence of child labour. The single most striking factor is the destitution of working children and their families. Millions of children in Bangladesh continue to work in conditions that are inhuman and environmentally unhealthy. Elimination of exploitative conditions of child labour requires both long term and short term measures.

Long term measures such as changes in the national economic and demographic structure through welfare policies may not be possible in the de-

veloping countries with the same rapidity and effectiveness found in the developed world. Particularly so if trade in third world countries is controlled by the vested interests of the west; if crude capitalist practices pervade the business arena in the developing world.

Drastic measures to enforce laws which make child labour illegal or ban imports from countries using child labour may be effective deterrents against the exploiters but it will not solve the problem of the children themselves. The appropriate solutions could be possible if laws were accompanied by policies and programmes to bring about socio-economic changes in the lives of the working children and their families.

The bill entitled "Child Labour Deterrence Act-1992" to be introduced at the next session of the US Congress will prohibit import of goods produced with child labour, estimated at 11% of the work force in Asian countries.

Garment industries in Bangladesh earn almost 12 million dollars a year, exporting 52% of its goods to the US market. If these products are prohibited in the US market,

employment outlets created for poor families in Bangladesh will be seriously eroded.

Each child employed in a garment factory takes back approximately Tk 300 to Tk 600 as monthly wages (inclusive of overtime) to the family although at some damage to his/her health. Sudden termination of work will create a serious financial crisis for the survival of the child and her/his family. It would be worthwhile — in this day and age of democracy and free economy — for the industrialists and the government to think in terms of improving the working conditions both to protect human rights as well as to make the industry viable.

In the first instant child workers could be replaced by unemployed parents/relatives, if any. Secondly, the government could ensure a healthy atmosphere for working children (who have no employable parents) in the factories, with reduced working hours, facilities for education, health and legal protection. The employer should be motivated to realise that thus, production, if slightly more expensive, may qualitatively improve with better working conditions.

Human rights activists who

have moved to ban such products, need to be motivated to recognise realities in a country like Bangladesh where poverty or human injustice cannot be wiped away by enactment or legal enforcement alone. Reasonable alternatives are to be sought to maintain over time an equilibrium between human rights and human needs.

The US Senate's intention to pass the above bill may be a blessing in disguise for many exploited children in the third world countries where private industries and governments have been slow to meet the needs of the working children. National policies and employers' cooperation, it is hoped, will now place children in the centre of their plans for national development.

These needs also indicate the need to improve research and survey of families of children who work. Perhaps this could lead to viable national interventions for family assistance such as job creation, family planning counselling, health and education. In surveying working children's family characteristics, we would need to focus our investigation on the parents' occupations/income and family size.

The assumption that cheap child labour creates segmentation/fragmentation in the labour market, the link between child labour and family size needs to be clarified for remedial measures.

Global surveys show that child labour is not an uncommon phenomenon even in the developed western world. The "US National Safe Work Place Institute" in Chicago, has estimated child labour in the US at 5.5 m. with 6,76,000 kids working in the informal sector over which the government has no control. The same report confirms job related deaths and injuries of children in 1990 at 139 and 71,660 children respectively. Lobbyists led by fast food companies are also making efforts to water down child labour regulations.

Children in western countries are producing goods that are imported by the developing countries. If some of these goods are tarnished by the stigma of child labour, then it is relevant to ask, how should the human rights activists of the receiving countries react? The reasons for child labour in the third world are focused on poverty, absence of social

Removal of causes of child exploitation requires both long term and short term measures. Social justice may be a long term objective, but cooperation from government, employers and community workers can help ensure a security net. Perhaps this cooperation can motivate employers to provide education, medicare and nutrition facilities to working children, thereby decreasing their stress of survival.

Drastic measures like the enforcement of child labour laws or a ban of imports by developed countries are short term answers which, if unaccompanied by socio-economic changes, might worsen the conditions of the poor for whose benefit the laws are being enacted.

The author is a development social worker, currently Director Project HELP for working children, An O Salish Kendra, Dhaka.

THE NETWORK FOR PEACE

How South Africa Violence is being Tackled at Grassroots

by Derek Ingram

THE commission inquiring into violence and intimidation in South Africa has called for the stationing of international police observers at police stations in Natal and in the black homeland of KwaZulu.

The plea is timely. In a week or two the most effective of the three international teams of observers which have been monitoring the violence since October — the one from the Commonwealth — is due to pull out. If it does, some of the impressive progress quietly achieved could be in jeopardy. The pending withdrawal may have prompted the commission's call.

More funding is needed if the operation is to continue. Britain, Australia and Canada have nodded agreement, but other Commonwealth countries have yet to respond.

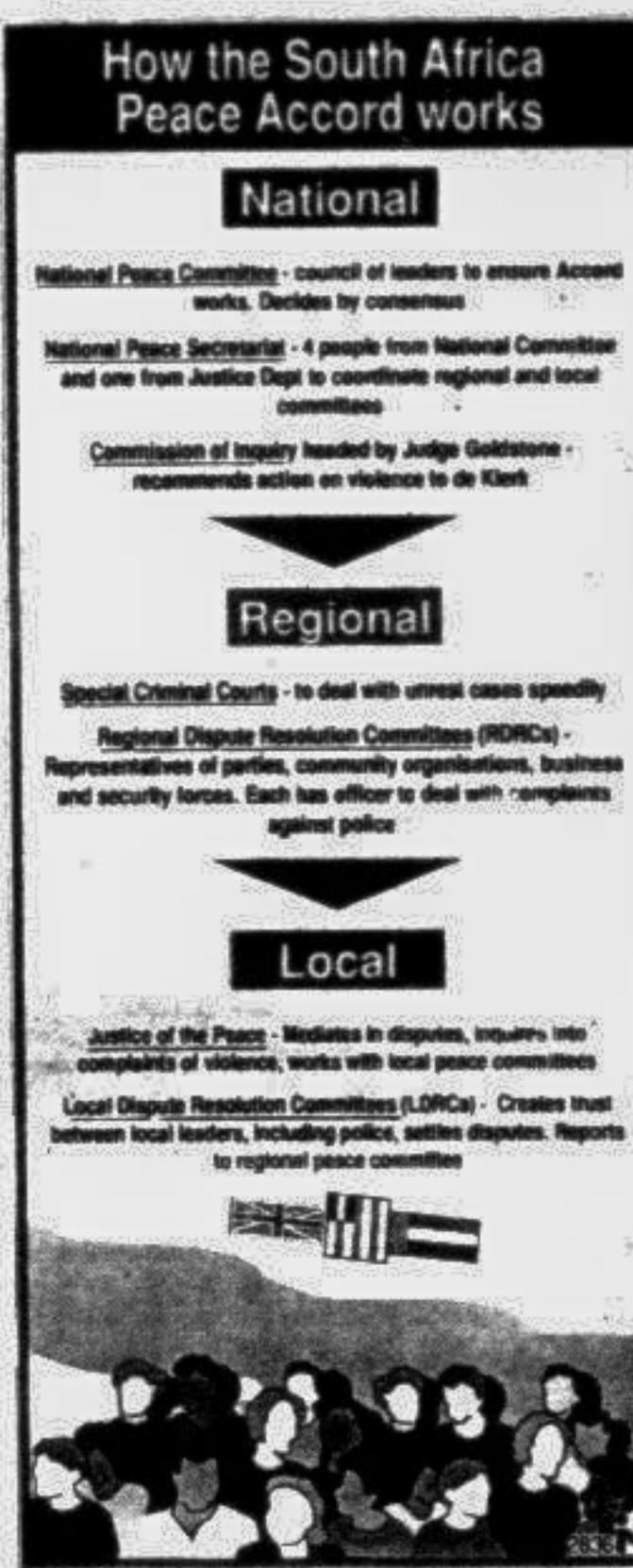
The escalation of violence is today the biggest obstacle to a political settlement in South Africa. Of late much progress has been made in negotiations between the government and the African National Congress (ANC) towards the introduction of an interim administration later this year — before the first universal franchise elections are held, in 1994 at the latest.

The constant news of violence, particularly in Natal, has blotted out the other side of the picture — the elaborate and painstaking process that is underway at the local level to defuse the violence and start building a harmonious society.

The process dates back to September 14, 1991 when, after hundreds of hours of negotiation, the National Peace Accord was signed in Johannesburg by the representatives of 24 organisations, including President FW de Klerk, Nelson Mandela, and Chief Gatsha Buthelezi.

Under the accord a structure reaching down to local leaders and the local police was set up to settle disputes. It aims to involve the entire

The rise in violence in South Africa in the last months of 1992 held up political negotiations for the transition to democratic rule. One problem is that people do not know about the extensive machinery set up under the 1991 Peace Accord to settle disputes. A big publicity campaign is now under way. Outside South African as well, work being done under the Accord is little known. Gemini News Service reveals what is happening on the ground.



The violence continues

community.

At the top is a National Peace Committee of leaders, a secretariat and the permanent Goldstone Commission. At the other end are local dispute resolution committees (LDRCs) and in between are 11 regional peace committees.

On each regional committee sit businessmen and church leaders as well as representatives of the ANC, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), the defence force and the po-

lice.

It has been said that the members of the commission are the peacekeepers, the members of the national committee the peacemakers and the members of the secretariat the peacebuilders.

The start has been slow but promising. International observers are struck by the way in which men and women from different backgrounds, races, political affiliations and walks of life sit together in one room and listen with defer-

ence to each other's views to solve violent situations in their own areas.

It can be a dangerous business, especially in Natal. In some areas the process has been plagued by killings of committee members, leading to boycotts by members of their organisations.

The Peace Accord is, as *The Sowetan*, the country's biggest newspaper with a mainly black readership, has pointed out, "an unprecedented social contract, demanding a peaceful

purpose from every single person in the land, backed up by structures to make it work."

The leaders declared at the signing: "We pledge ourselves with integrity of purpose to make this land a prosperous one where we can all live, work hand play together in peace and harmony."

The accord lays down codes of conduct for political organisations, security forces and the police. Sixteen months later it is all too easy to conclude that it has not worked. The violence seems to show no sign of abating.

One problem is that most of the population still does not know much about the accord. People are not fully aware of the committee machinery or that it has been set up so that they can quickly appeal when they have a problem.

A million rand, nation-wide operation is now being launched by a public relations to put this right. Money for it has been collected from the government, media, and business firms.

Internationally, too, little is known of this experiment. Only the violence is constantly reported; the ways in which some of it is being prevented as a result of this improving cooperation receives no public attention.

Partly this is because much of the work has to be done quietly or it would not succeed. Partly, however, there has been a public relations failure on the part of the government.

One worry is that the accord's structures at the top level suffers from lack of black

involvement. At a recent meeting of 23 chairpersons of the regional dispute resolution committees only three were black.

The latest atrocities have been committed by whites of the militant right and blacks of the militant left. Three important groups did not sign the Peace Accord; the Conservative Party, the Afrikaner Resistance Movement (AWB) and the PAC, whose military wing claimed the killing late last year of whites in King William's Town.

The most persistent violence is laid at the door of elements of the security forces — the so-called Third Force, whose existence de Klerk still denies — and Buthelezi's Inkatha Freedom Party. De Klerk has now purged two generals and 21 other officers, although many army hardliners remain in key posts.

But the root cause of the South African problem remains unchanged and has not even begun to be tackled: the economic apartheid that has followed political apartheid. The wealthy white world in South Africa does not know the conditions of the blacks living in the townships perhaps only a few kilometres down the road.

Unemployment in some places is up to 60 per cent. People have lost all hope of betterment. This economic hardship constantly fuels the violence. Foreign investment is still not forthcoming, although many business people believe that even without it the government could be taking some measures to improve black living standards.

In the last five years it has done nothing to provide clean water, improve health care, education and housing. A detailed document has been drawn up by a task force setting out plans to improve housing. Nothing has been acted on. The government is waiting for international financing.

Exchange rate: \$1 = Rand 3
DEREK INGRAM is Editor of Gemini News Service.

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.

Dhaka-Khulna road

Sir, The land route via Maowa between Dhaka and Khulna or Jessore continues to be planned since 1954. Unfortunately it takes at least 28 hours by train or steamer while at least nine hours are needed by bus. There is no good bus like AC bus which is very much common in Dhaka-Chittagong route. Similarly AC bus system does not exist in Dhaka-Rajshahi route. One can travel by bus or train between Dhaka and Chittagong within five hours while more rapid transportation is planned by building bridges.

Under the above backdrop, it is quite natural to do some research as to why Air Conditioned buses are not plying in Dhaka-Khulna or Dhaka-Rajshahi route? Are those people, not capable to pay the AC bus fares? Let the economists do some study while government pledge of equal development in all areas needs to be

practised. Let a firm date be fixed when good comparative communications will be developed to connect all the divisional headquarters at least. Sadiq Alec Maghbar, Dhaka

Where is right of abode?

Sir, Over 400 Palestinians driven out of their homeland by Israel, violating Human Rights in the occupied territory, have been left out in the No Man's Land.

Pakistan will deport her 1.5 million illegal immigrants; United Arab Emirates has already deported about 2000 Pakistanis and many other foreigners are expected to be deported because of their involvement in the demonstrations over the disputed mosque in India; Malaysia and Singapore are planning on returning undesired foreign workers; Germany is building electronic wall to check asy-

lum flood while trying to get rid of the unwanted aliens; western countries deport any one anytime; and so forth.

All states have legal rights to deport aliens who violate immigration laws, but the "deportation" of the native Palestinians (languishing in the middle of nowhere now when the peace process is in progress) has been condemned by the sensible world as an inhuman move.

Sometimes foreigners face deportation due to abrupt change in government regulation or office error that makes victims out of the innocents and damages the victims' lives as well as their national wellbeing.

Questionable deportation should be reviewed by the jurisdiction concerned. National and international legal and humanitarian concerns can offer possible helps to such hapless victims.

M Rahman
Zila School Road, Mymensingh

Mosquitoes

Sir, Recently an article in an English daily has very rightly pointed to the mosquito problem and to the failed programme of DCC (Dhaka City Corporation) au-

thority.

Mosquito menace is not something new to any of the dwellers of Dhaka City. After sunset, every moment is frequently punctuated by the bites of these blood sucking tiny "draculas". Not only that they bite more intolerably now, but many of the dwellers may have experienced a sudden push in of these tiny pests in the cold evening anywhere — in your house or office in old or new Dhaka or in the Sangsad Bhaban area or Shishu park or the type.

Not very lately, in one of the TV programmes, "Ehoo Gaan Shikhi" conducted by Ferdousi Rahman, we witnessed her teaching the children a Bengali song which describes the menace of mosquitoes.

"Tomra Bolo, Shondha Hole Jodi Bhon, Bhon, Bhon Bhon Kore Mosha,

"Tobe Ki Aar, Bhalo Laage..." But did any one, specially the concerned authority ever think of eradicating the mosquitoes or at least controlling the population of mosquitoes to a tolerable level?

The question will apparently appear to be less to the concerned authority. But if the authorities really feel has to that it is impossible to man-

age the population boom of mosquitoes, then, I would suggest should go through the articles appearing in the press from time to time, such as one I referred to, and contact the authors to seek their advice to do something really practical.

If the authorities reportedly brace an expenditure of Tk. 10 crore every year to control mosquitoes and achieve more failure than success, then I must say can well add just some more money in the budget, to do away with the breeding grounds of mosquitoes as a first step to source reduction, and find at least a cue to more success and less failure.

The mosquito menace is not confined to Dhaka city only, rather it is a vexing problem in almost all the cities and towns of Bangladesh. It is observed and experienced that comparatively the mosquito population is lesser in the rural areas than in the urban areas. The reason is obviously clear — the rich breeding grounds in the cities. In the rural areas we hardly find any stagnant polluted pools or polluted water-logged areas. All the water bodies are utilized by the villagers one way or the other which makes it difficult for mosquitoes to select any for their permanent breeding

ground.

The duck weeds proposed in the article referred to above are found in plenty in the ponds and haors in the rural areas. That's a natural deterrent. A plan of controlling mosquitoes without much use of pesticides will not only save the public from the menace of mosquitoes but also from the toxic hazards of the pesticides which are being unnecessarily used by the concerned authority.

Mohammad Rafiqul Islam
Rayer Bazar, Dhaka

"Witness to History"

Sir, I was stunned to read what was written under the caption "Witness to History" (Ahsan's Testimony Before Rahman Commission) published in your esteemed newspaper, The Daily Star on 15.1.93 in the Weekend Magazine. I am sure this has revealed many a have-creating news which many people perhaps did not know before. It will remain a historical record.

You have no doubt rendered a good service to the readers by publishing this historical facts. I congratulate you for this publication.

K K Das
Dilkusha C/A, Dhaka