

Rohingya Repatriation Resumes

According to reports the stalled repatriation of Rohingya refugees is expected to resume from today. A comprehensive agreement is also expected to be signed within a few days between the government of Bangladesh and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). We welcome both these developments. We are happy at the satisfactory conclusion of negotiations between our government and the UN agency. After all when any part of the UN and one of its active member states fight, there is really no winner. Both are losers in one sense or the other. Through repeated editorials and reports this paper highlighted the points of view of the Bangladesh side, while not forgetting the special mandate — to speak for the refugees, and only for the refugees — that UNHCR has. We repeatedly made the point that given Bangladesh's unwavering commitment to human rights, the differences that emerged between its position and that of the UNHCR could not be one of substance, but more that of communication or the lack of it. The Foreign Minister's talks with the UN Secretary General removed the communication gap, and we now hope that speedy repatriation of the large number of refugees will take place soon.

There are however several lessons to be learnt from this episode. The main issue on which the trouble began was on the definition of 'voluntariness' of the refugees who were to return to their homes in Myanmar. The refugees were being interviewed by both sides, Bangladesh and UNHCR, together, which the latter found not satisfactory enough to be certain of how 'willing' the refugees were to return. UNHCR's suspicion of coercion, we think, was unfair. Its consequent unilateral withdrawal could be construed to be a bit high-handed. The government on the other hand must understand the central points of the High Commission's mandate — points on which this UN body cannot be expected to compromise. We hope that both sides have emerged wiser from this episode, and that they will be able to work together better now. It is our hope that the new comprehensive agreement which will be signed in the very near future should not leave any door open either for any confusion or, for that matter, dual interpretation. But in the unlikely event that such a situation should arise again — we expect it will not — then there should be free exchange of views and no unilateral withdrawal by any party.

Bangladesh does not want to forcibly return the refugees. But there should be no doubt in anybody's mind that we want the repatriation process to move fast. With the best of intentions, it is not possible for Bangladesh to bear the burden of refugees for long. We look forward to the forthcoming visit of Ms Sadako Ogata, the High Commissioner for Refugees, and hope that by the time she arrives the repatriation will have resumed in full gear.

A Festive Intimation of the 'Other Cinema'

The Third International Short Film Festival concluded on Friday on — we unreservedly say it — a note of success. There was this year a new dimension to the success that differed from successes of the earlier two festivals. For two years people wondered if 'short films' could be a subject of developing a forum and year-long activity based on them, not to speak of holding international festivals of these.

The Short Film Forum, the base-organisation, proved to be a wonderful rallying point for talented young people bubbling with enthusiasm — thanks mostly to the asphyxiating material and intellectual situation created by an unending might of military dictatorship. We have no doubt that even some of the most optimistic among them were indeed groping to strike some social relevance for their work and the medium. This year they have decidedly struck gold. The degeneration of the overall film situation of Bangladesh to depths lower than any other third world country's has presented on a platter to these *enfans terrible* the credo of the alternative cinema, something talked about over the recent decades in India and elsewhere but still is as fresh an idea as to remind one of the French *Salon de Refuses* which triumphed in time not only over the Academy but took the whole of world of art as a true liege. How we wish alternative cinema triumph in the same manner in the third world. Isn't it the same as wishing that today's peripheral and almost non-existent attempts at the art that is film become tomorrow's mainstream commercial cinema running full length into hours and spreading throughout the land? Although Bangladesh very badly needs exactly this, but can this dream be realised? It simply cannot be with all other things, social, cultural, economic and above all political, remaining constant. We can at the moment only lament that cinema could be the most powerful medium to effect a change for better in all of the aspects of our society.

At the festival there was a feast of 124 films from 24 countries — and not all the entries conformed to the length connotated by 'short', although, for sure, all of them belonged to what we lovingly call the 'Other Cinema' — films that set you to think what you haven't ever thought and know what you have never known about man and his (or her) situation — even if that person is so close to you as to be your own goodself. From the 21st to the 29th of January it was a delightful exile for streams of people from the make-believe fairland of the box-office cinema — an exile into truth and beauty and humanity.

Most striking, specially from the Bangalee point of view, was Sabiha Sumar's entry from Pakistan — *Where Peacocks Dance*. There was a second and tell-tale title to the picture 'The Politics of Conservation', — exposing the hollowness of the Pakistani Punjabi coterie to hold the divergent ethno-cultural entities of the state in one piece by the use of the 'ideological glue'. There were works on Adivasi resistance in Chaibasa to a dam building on the Subarnarekha and the first Indian cinema actress, Kamala Bai, by two women directors — Vasudha Joshi and Reena Mohan. There was Ruchir Joshi's entry on the bauls of Bengal — *Eleven Miles*.

It was a festival in all meanings of the word — and very fetching, very rewarding, breathed of culture and life and truth and beauty. Our mainstream cinema must take a cue from these or prepare to be on the way out.

A FEW weeks ago, in Moscow, President Bush and President Yeltsin met and the two discussed matters of mutual concern. Gorbachev was not in the scene, nor was he expected to be. What surprised many onlookers and observers was the fact that there was a complete silence about him, the man who, more than any one else, had initiated the changes in the relationship between the two superpowers. The consequences of his Glasnost and Perestroika, even he could not anticipate. Though he himself was swept aside by the force of the currents released by him, the whole world acknowledges his signal contribution to the end of cold war. Gorbachev belongs to history. The most unkind view that can be taken about his role is that he not only helped bring about the end of cold war, he also succeeded in ringing the knell of the Soviet Union. The change of a bipolar world into a unipolar one has surely caused fresh anxieties, especially in Asia and Africa. One may not approve of the latest doings of US in Iraq, but the disapproval remains confined to a resolution adopted by the Arab League and a faint expression of uneasiness by Yeltsin. The unipolar world may be a more relaxed world, gradually getting away from arms race and its evils, but it is also a more lopsided world, with the weak at the mercy of

the strong. Gorbachev belongs to history but Yeltsin's Russia disowns him. What is more of a pity is that the Summit at Moscow failed to extend to him the minimum diplomatic courtesy due to him.

I owe this information to a news item that I happened to come across some time back, and it immediately reminded me of a similar incident which happened in Dhaka during the first SAARC Summit here, in 1985.

Ziaur Rahman was blotted out from the speeches and utterances of his successor, President Hussein Mohammad Ershad. At least one head of state, President Qayyum of Maldives, found this odd, and he blurted out something to express his sense of disgust.

The next Summit-to-be will take care of the lapse, and Ziaur Rahman will figure in ceremonial speeches and his tomb will be visited. After all the liberty that has been taken with it, history will assert itself.

Which means that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, whose name has been completely erased out from state functions and celebrations in Bangladesh, will reappear after the moratorium has been lifted. Indeed in a recent official speech the Prime Minister did mention him, putting him in the third position in the order of the illustrious dead. It was a travesty of

precedence, and caused more anger than joy, but it nevertheless indicated that the conspiracy of silence was beginning to weigh on the conscience of those vowed to silence.

The official history of the Soviet Union, we are told, had to be revised frequently and chapters dealing with leaders, either supplanted or currently under disgrace, had to be rewritten. The same must be true of China which, during its shorter history, has witnessed heroes of yesterday turned into villains of today. It was easy to

erase a lot of Gorbachev, who could not have become what he is today. But one time friends have it in them to become the bitterest enemies.

That politics is a less cruel and a much more civilized game today in Russia than what it was under Stalin cannot be denied. In bringing this change about, Gorbachev had played a most decisive role. Considerable bitterness attended the manner in which Gorbachev was removed from power. One system, one political order was replaced by another. The two leaders stood for two policies each contradicting the other. That being the immediate background, Gorbachev's being invited to an

official banquet — if only metaphorically — was expecting the impossible.

The official blackout of Bangabandhu can perhaps be explained, as proceeding from a comparable situation. The country remains intact but the events of mid-August, 1975, virtually heralded a new system. Justifying the new order demanded putting a convenient construction on the older order. The older order was just emerging and only its contours were visible: the Presidential form and the one-party system. Even this outline was enough to draw the democratic ire of people who, during the next fifteen years of their ascendancy, had ample scope to practice their own brand of democracy.

Bangabandhu has left a problem for his successors in power: between the two has existed a political incompatibility. The successors have tried to solve this problem by both the means available to them: by erasing the past, and by distorting the picture.

This is matched, at the other end, by excessive adulation, a hero-worship of a kind which keeps criticism at bay. The moment is not arrived yet when a balanced, unbiased history can be attempted of the political developments since the fall of Ayub. Passion and partisanship have come to play a dominating role in today's politics to the extent that within the Sangsad and out-

side, the real business of politics is often laid aside, or altogether suspended, and a battle of wit soon turns into a battle of words, harsh, shrill and abusive.

In Spain the Moorish past, in the Balkans the Turkish past and in India and in Bangladesh the Buddhist past have been all but erased. Fanaticism both religious and ethnic, has done it in the past and, witness Bosnia Herzegovina, can do it now. Political intolerance will not go that far. Still, given the opportunity, it can at least rewrite the past. It can produce a version of history, though this can never be the final version.

Currently in Pakistan, they are having a hot debate on the role of politicians — perhaps also of generals, — two were indistinguishable in those days — at the time of the break-up of Pakistan. Apparently history, or that which passed for history, is being reviewed. Out of frustration, out of bitterness has come a longing for truth. In Bangladesh, there is no official history, but there is an official attitude, a point of view which stands on the way of history. Rumour goes that invaluable documents pertaining to the war of liberation have been destroyed, because these are untraceable now. In the absence of any attempt at fixing the responsibility one is permitted to conclude that at the official level, there may be a reluctance to face the truth.

the opposition at the Sangsad has not used either the question-answer session or a debate on the economy to elicit all the facts on this crucial matter. As we all know, whatever may be his shortcomings, Saifur Rahman is certainly not shy in speaking out on any of the issues facing his government or the country. It must also be said to his credit that in all his meetings with trade bodies or representatives of the media, he has often gone as far as possible in focussing on the flaws in the administration.

I wonder if as a regular columnist of a leading English-language daily in the country, Kibria cannot ask for an exclusive interview with the Finance Minister for obtaining all the information that he has accused Rahman of hiding from the public. It would be indeed a test for the Finance Minister and a professional challenge for Kibria.

Once the distinguished columnist of the *Star* takes up such a challenge, he may well refrain from making such sweeping statements, to quote from his last Sunday's piece, as "the list of sick industries is getting longer, the consumer prices are increasing and corruption (remain) as pervasive as ever," without quoting any sources and providing any figures. When we read such statements which may be based on hearsays, we can worry as to what can happen to an expert, a retired civil servant and a former UN official when he takes up a partisan position in preference to a broad-based national open for reasons best known to himself, and, in the process, depriving his readers of benefitting from his expertise and understanding of the challenges facing not just the BNP government but the country as a whole.

A banker and a financial analyst by profession who has worked at home and abroad, the writer is an occasional contributor to the media.

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

deal with Lin Piau, but Mao posed a problem. He was too big to be dismissed or denigrated outright, and his diminution had to be cautious and qualified. If the majority of the late leader's portraits and statues could be removed, and his tomb carefully kept out of bounds for tourists, some at least had to be kept where they were.

More common than erasing the past is distorting the past. In the case of Sheikh Mujib, both the processes have been tried, and continue to be tried. This is done more successfully in Radio and Television than in the print media. This is done with some finesse by some politicians, but more usually in a clumsy fashion by others.

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OPINION

Columnist Kibria Should Discard a Partisan Approach to National Issues

Mir Abdus Sattar

tical situation in the country. Here, Kibria's judgement is as hasty as it is abrasive. He says, "The (Saifur Rahman) fails to recognize that the continuing stagnation of the economy is a clear evidence of the failure of the macro-economic management of the economy."

The columnist refers to his favourite expression, stagnation again towards the end of his piece, "The state of the economy, after two years of BNP rule causes nothing but concern. It may be one of the longest periods of stagnation that we have endured."

Stagnation means, nothing is moving. While I am far from pleased with what we have achieved so far, I would not use the term "stagnation" to describe the present situation. It would not be stagnation if disbursement of aid during 1992 met the international standard, as former ERD Secretary Enam Chaudhury told the *Star* last week, if the export earning remained at a satisfactory level, if revenue collection, a tool for the mobilisation of internal resources, was one of the highest in recent years and if the foreign exchange reserve reached all time high. (On the foreign exchange situation, we should recognise that our industrialists are not importing capital goods. This is a negative aspect. On the other hand, it also means we have built up a healthy reserve in hard currency to meet any emergency and to be able to support a drive towards industrialisation when it does take place. Bangladesh had seldom been in such a lucky situation before.)

Again, is it "stagnation" that the rate of inflation has been halted, agricultural production

is up and the exchange value of our currency remains stable? Here, I am certainly concerned about farmers unable to get a fair price for their produce. In a way, this is the result of the market economy operating without subsidies. The administration should watch the situation with care.

As we all know, even in the worst possible scenario, there are always some areas of positive achievements. This is the case with Bangladesh today.

To turn to one area of major concern, there are all kinds of reasons why foreign investments are still staying away from Bangladesh. The main reason: Our competitors in this region, such as Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia, have been politically more stable for a long period, while Bangladesh has known the most turbulent years during the past decade, including in past four during the anti-Ershad agitation and later, during the infighting among political parties. Again, our competitors have so much more natural resources than our country, resources whose possible exploitation serves as the biggest incentive for foreign capital.

to compete in the tender and get the work.

Reason number Two: This type of stiff condition deliberately discourages flourishing of local industries, as well as local technology. Thus the country, in course of time, becomes more and more dependent on foreign technology through foreign products. Today, no more there is imperialism in the form of physical occupation of a foreign land, but it seems, of imperialism in the form of dependence on foreign countries for technology centres. We must be very cautious about it. I tend to recall, about three years ago a similar type of tender for the supply of autorickshaws was invited. In that tender also Bangladesh was not allowed to participate. As a result we see that the roads of Dhaka City have been filled with a particular foreign billy-taxis. If that tender could have been open to Bangladesh and won by any of our enterprises in the field, its counterpart would have got wonderful opportunity of expanding market and it could have improved its performance through more R&D including locally-made parts.

In the past there was an autocratic regime which just ran the country and cared little for the interest of the nation. So they took foreign loan, aid, or grant for their personal interest whatever the terms and conditions might be. But the present government is a democratic one, and must be

very cautious about the terms and conditions. Our motto should be: Any loan, aid or grant that hinders the interest of the nation politically, economically or technically should not be accepted. Government of the people has nothing to fear for the loss of this type of loan, aid or grant, people must understand the situation. We hope the government would take appropriate measure in the present case too.

Dr Syed Ali Afzal
Uttara, Dhaka.

Tribute to Audrey Hepburn

Sir, I want to express the true feelings of a student at the sad demise of Audrey Hepburn. Today the world mourns her death. We will always remember her with fond memories. Of all the good-will ambassadors who have so far served the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Audrey Hepburn occupied a special place in the hearts of millions, particularly in the Third World. She gave to the children world-over the affection and fond care as much what she had given to her first movie character in the *Roman Holiday* which got her the Oscar award. When Hepburn passed away on Wednesday the 20th January at her lonely village home in Switzerland after a long illness of cancer, the children of this world lost a caring friend.

Bangladeshis will always remember her from the visit she paid to them in October, 1989. Just before the late Bengali film maker Satyajit Ray died in April, 1992, Audrey Hepburn had announced the special honorary Oscar award given to him by the American film industry. We urge BTV to broadcast the excerpts of Audrey Hepburn's visit to Bangladesh and also her famous movies in the near future as a special tribute.

May her soul rest in peace.
Adib Reza
Paribagh House,
Dhaka

The English Language

Sir, Certainly the readers of newspapers will recall that during the past twentyone years a few hundred of letters and write-ups were published in different newspapers wherein each individual writer had expressed the different view points. However, all the writers, more or less, had expressed the importance of bearing the English language.

Recently BTV had made a declaration asking for opinion and it was done in the Bangla language. Possibly the TV discussion shall also be in the Bangla language, so that the people may understand the points of the discussion. Nevertheless, to maintain the fragrance of each individual language, it is very important to uphold that the discussion

on any language ought to be also in that particular language and in our case it is to be in the English language and that shall be the most vital movement to create interests of the people about the English language.

To develop any country of the world, only ten percent of the total population usually do think, formulate the theories and plans, and work out the plans in the fields of action while the 90% of the population do come forward to cooperate as the partners and/or for investment and/or only as the working partners etc.

Similarly the importance of the English language is vital to those who would desire to go abroad for higher studies and the number would not exceed beyond 10%. It is very vital to remember that the English language has become almost a lingua franca, and it is more convenient for us to study it.

The English language could be a good lingua franca for our students, who would go abroad for study purposes and it could be easily included for our students to study it with interest and zeal. However, our students ought not to be made to feel that they are not intelligent because they do not know good English and hence detained — herein is the problem created in Bangladesh and such problem has no economic value.

Andrew D'Costa
Hemendra Das Road, Dhaka.

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.

Dependence on foreign technology

Sir, On 7th January, an international tender was invited through a local English daily for supplying different materials for the expansion of the electricity distribution system in the rural areas of Bangladesh under a debt relief grant from a developed country. In that tender the bidders may be from any developed country belonging to the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) and from any developing country except Bangladesh.

If it would have been open to Bangladesh, some local industries might have participated in the tender. Generally in this type of tender the local industries get 15% discount. But in most of the cases the raw materials are imported from abroad. Our import policy is such that in many cases the duty on the imported raw material is too high, so the local industries face a lot of difficulties in making a successful bid. But in the present case, the condition is absolute: No industry or firm in Bangladesh can compete in the bid. Our

question is: why cannot Bangladesh compete in this tender? What is wrong with us? What is the philosophy behind this embargo? We want to know the reasons.

Generally this type of stiff condition has got two ill effects on the recipient country. So this kind of foreign aid or grant, whatever it may be, must be rejected for the greater interest of the country.

Reason number One: If the local industry cannot compete in this type of international tender, it (local industry) cannot survive, because its market is locally based and that is too limited. In a poor developing country like Bangladesh most of the development works are undertaken under foreign assistance, aid or grant, but bulk of these industrial materials are required there. Now, if that market is blocked by this type of peculiar condition, the local industries are to face slow death largely due to dirt of the market facilities. This is exactly what is happening with many of our industries. Rather, for the interest of the recipient country, the conditions should be such that the local industries are encouraged