

Good Luck Mirpur

A larger than life by-election is being held today. What should have been a normal process of filling up a vacant seat in the parliament has turned into a serious contest between our two principal political parties. The reasons for the importance of this by-election are many. Unlike the three earlier ones where the AL recaptured its previously held seats, this one is the first which is being fought in a previously BNP held area. If the BNP wins, status quo is maintained. If, on the contrary, the AL wins, then it could be taken as a negative verdict on the performance of the government. Or at least, this is how the opposition AL would like to present it. And, somehow, the BNP seems to have reasoned the same way. Otherwise, why should the BNP attach so much importance for one seat which will neither threaten its majority to form government nor cause any problems in the voting pattern inside the House? Yet, the BNP government thought it fit to postpone the PM's state visit to France, risking the ire of the protocol conscious French President who is, after all, now the senior-most head of state in the Western world.

As by-elections go, the Mirpur seat is definitely very important. Yet we feel that too much is being made of its impending outcome. A BNP defeat, if it all comes about, will be a political rebuff no doubt, but is not likely to be as disastrous as it is being feared. In fact it might actually be a blessing in disguise. A defeat may help to break the sense of complacency in which BNP had couched itself ever since its surprise victory in February '91. It may actually trigger the type of bold action by Begum Zia that many of her senior party members, and those who are more in touch with the grassroots workers, have been clamouring for. We fear that because both the parties attached tremendous significance to this election, both of them tried very hard to win it. And when too much effort is made to win a particular election, the likelihood of bending rules, democratic norms, and election regulations becomes very high.

We are not at all certain, if in the anxiety to save political face, too much money was not spent in this election. Similarly voter intimidation, coercion, or even vote buying may take place. Possibility of all this occurring rises when parties become too eager to win, and too much shame is attached to defeat. After all, in every election, there has to be a winner and, at least, a loser. We suggest a serious attempt at a post mortem of the Mirpur by-election by the Election Commission to dispel rumours that far more than permitted amounts of funds were spent there.

A lesson that we must learn from this by-election concerns how much the ruling party should be allowed to use the promise of government funds for development of an area as an election pledge. Does it not amount to using public funds to create party support? Some of it is inevitable, we know. But much of it can be curbed. And it should be for the sake of fairness in elections, and for the growth of healthy democratic norms. The reverse case of threatening to punish the voters of an area, as recently reported, by withholding development funds, because they voted for the opposition, is another example of the same kind of abuse. Stricter supervisory role of the Election Commission, not only in monitoring how funds are used, but also overseeing how government machinery is used to influence elections should be ensured.

As for the election, we wish the people of Mirpur a peaceful and coercion-free one. It is our hope that both the BNP and the AL, and other smaller parties, will prove our worst fears to be false, and allow the people of Mirpur to exercise their franchise most judiciously. And, as for the candidates, may the better one win.

South Asia's Chance for Economic Take-off

The indispensability of political stability for the success of economic reforms in the South Asian countries has been underscored by economic experts from Japan and the seven-member South Asian Association for regional Co-operation (SAARC) at a seminar in New Delhi recently. Evidently, the experts could not be more correct in their observation. Regional conflicts fuelled by divisive ethnic, religious and territorial issues have had serious negative impacts on the investment climate in the South Asian region. The prospect of the economic reforms these countries have embarked upon has been upset at the outset.

However, this is one region that, according to the Japanese, has immense potential for absorbing future foreign investment. But the fact is not quite unknown to people here either. The SAARC region compares quite favourably with the Association of South Asian Nations (ASEAN). The countries of South Asia have enough raw materials, cheap labour and a large market — all very important factors for industrial success.

A comparative study of Japan-ASEAN and Japan-SAARC collaborative ventures, however, presents a very dismal picture for the SAARC region. Japanese investment in this area has been only less than two per cent of that in the ASEAN region. Not a positive sign at all. The same figure constitutes a mere 0.002 per cent of the total Japanese investment abroad. Even in 1991, the number of Japanese investments in industrial ventures in the ASEAN countries was about 3,000 as against approximately 100 in the SAARC countries. Read against the 6.5 billion US dollar Japan's trade with South Asia, the 62 billion US dollar trade of the country with the ASEAN certainly gives a lop-sided picture; but the trade volume for the SAARC is still large compared to the investments this region has received from Japan.

Japan's worry is understandable. So is its preference for the ASEAN countries, known for political stability, for investment. The recent postponement of the SAARC summit — and that also twice — has moreover sent a more alarming signal not only for Japan but also other investors. The leaders of these countries should now sit together to find out how they can uphold their countries' economic progress above political advantage they often indiscreetly seek. The home work has to be done within their respective geographical boundaries and also collectively under the aegis of their common forum SAARC. In the post-cold-war era, the opportunity for welcoming foreign investment will not be always there. If the countries of the region want not to rue over missed chances, they must set themselves the task of getting out of this political morass — and soon enough.

THE postponement of SAARC Summit, as an extended consequence of the destruction of the Babri mosque in India, has opened an opportunity for the member nations to review the organization's mission and activities. This should be a priority agenda for future summit meetings.

We have examples of two successful regional associations of sovereign nations to develop a scheme of our own. One is the West European Community and the other is the ASEAN.

Our neighbouring ASEAN cannot be a meaningful example for us for basically two reasons. Firstly, there is an underlying ideological-political understanding in these countries which is absent in our case. The political system in these countries is not quite like ours in terms of political and social organisations, etc. Secondly, the economic cooperation, in respect of investments and trade, has been helped by common ethnic elements who are also major economic forces in all these countries.

The European community's integration was both political and economic. Political integration was the vision. But to start with, high in the list of priorities was the effort to find solution to some basic economic issues without which political unity was difficult. These issues were wages, taxation system, subsidies, etc. Reduction in the high degree of inequalities existing in these areas among the member nations was essential to the opening up of the national borders. There were, no doubt, two basic compulsions to this idea of unity. One was the maintenance of peace in Western Europe and the other was the threat from the communist Soviet Union. The wisdom of the European statesmen have now been proven. Peace has been maintained in Western Europe unbrokenly for almost fifty years and the Soviet Union has collapsed.

But unlike SAARC, different activities and steps taken towards integrating West Europe were not kept confined within

SAARC, Sovereignty and Politics

by ASHK Sadique

the four walls of the government Secretariat, as an exclusive club of the diplomats and some government functionaries. People of these countries in Europe were involved in running the affairs of their own countries through their representatives. They achieved this by setting up institutions like the European Parliament and the European Court of Justice. The European Parliament represent different shades of the political spectrum in each member country. The membership is not confined to the political party in power. The system allows the opposition political party members to get elected.

The European Court sits as a supranational institution. Individuals or groups in any of the constituent country can seek redress in this court for grievances occurring within the nation. The body can adjudicate on matters relating to human rights, trade disputes etc.

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SAARC has, on the other hand, failed to excite people's expectation in Bangladesh. It has remained a play of a section of the top echelon of government functionaries. Most people in the country including those educated, have little feeling about it, or attach any importance to it. Occasional exchange of business and cultural delegations is not enough to justify the existence of this high sounding organisation. For those purposes, some sort of an trade pact among these countries would have been adequate. The heads of governments need not then meet once very year, I should think.

South Asian Court could have been set up to resolve some interstate trade and social issues. The jurisdictional scope for this court could have been gradually widened. It is obvious that human rights issues involving ethnic disputes could not at this stage be included in the court's jurisdiction because of the still simmering problems in more than one member state of SAARC.

But any idea that economic integration can succeed with a common representative political forum, is an idle dream, devoid of reality, which cannot be faulted. A case in point is the situation created by the

they would have better and weightier things to do. Furthermore, it is questionable how deep, through the national consciousness, will permeate the affects of various elitist seminars held in Dhaka which do not involve the people. What we witness in Bangladesh today is periodic 'lamashas', expensive ones too, besides being insensitive to the citizens' needs and preferences.

Obviously the scars of the difficult birth of the nations of South Asia, especially the three nations of the subcontinent, are still too vivid to expect a strong bond like that in Europe. Additionally the demographic disparity among these nations is a hindrance to a representative body in line with the Euro-Parliament. Notwithstanding these problems, it is still possible to devise an equitable plan for popular representation of the member nations in a common forum. Even if such a political forum were deferred at the initial stages for a long period, say for 10 years, at least a

destruction of the Babri mosque in India by some people from the major religious community there. This one incident has rocked the foundation of SAARC. This has sadly happened because the organizational superstructure of SAARC, does not have effective supporting base organizations at popular levels. There is no system of accountability for the deeds of the pundits in the diplomatic offices of SAARC countries except to their own governments, whose creatures, in any case, they are.

How should Bangladesh, a member of SAARC, react to that unacceptable event in India? The validity of open and strong reaction among the people and within the government of Bangladesh has

creating communal frenzy usually so uncharacteristic of the tolerant Bangali. India must surely understand this reality.

However, one must question if all our overt reactions were correct. On the government's part, it had failed to measure up to the situation. It should have warned the defunct forces of 1971 that despite their political symbiosis, the government would not tolerate criminal activities. The government should also have given clear political direction to the law enforcing agencies that they would be held responsible for any untoward incident happening consequent to the destruction of the mosque in India. The refusal of the government to acknowledge the resultant victimization of a section of the citizens of this country compounded its

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three basis. One, that event has deeply hurt the religious sentiments of the Muslims of this country. Thus they could not but strongly protest. They are right in doing so. Secondly, it has affected the basic human right of a section — the minority community — of the people in that country in as much as it has affected right of practising religion and of protecting a cultural heritage. This had given the right to all sections of the people in Bangladesh, irrespective of their social, political and religious beliefs, to register protest. Thirdly, due to the long history of social and cultural linkage between the two countries, the people and the government of Bangladesh must worry about the backlash in this country of such events occurring across the border. Moreover, the defeated forces of 1971 are expected to try to obtain political mileage from such events by

overall failure.

As a citizen, I also feel disturbed by the reaction in our Parliament. Was it at all necessary, even more so, was it wise, to move any resolution on this issue, not to speak of adopting one? If the newspapers correctly reported the speeches, one failed to notice much restraint in the comments of the honourable members, on the happening of that event in another country which is a member of the SAARC community. There could have been an attempt to devise a consensus to avoid adopting a resolution rather than framing a unanimous one. The honourable members could have expressed their opinions, make their points and then considered the issue as talked out, without formalising it all through a resolution.

In view of the political importance and high sensitivity of that event in India and the

reaction in Bangladesh, a discussion in the Parliament was unavoidable. In fact, it was the correct thing to do, because it was far better to provide an opportunity to give vent to popular feelings within the confines of the Parliament, than bringing it to the streets. But everyone could have been aware of the larger global implications of what was said and done in the Parliament. One must be conscious of the reality of our situation: economic, geopolitical et al and, above all, the effect of all these on SAARC. Going a little further, the government could have avoided making all these their own show by suspending whip, allowing all honourable members of its party the freedom to speak, and by not adopting a resolution. Then the views expressed by the treasury bench members, especially those holding administrative positions would not be taken as views of the government per se by people within the country and without. As a Bangali, I would certainly resent if under similar or any other circumstances a foreign Parliament adopted a resolution condemning Bangladesh. One should also wonder whether those in-charge of SAARC affairs had correctly assessed the implications of that resolution and has advised other members of the government.

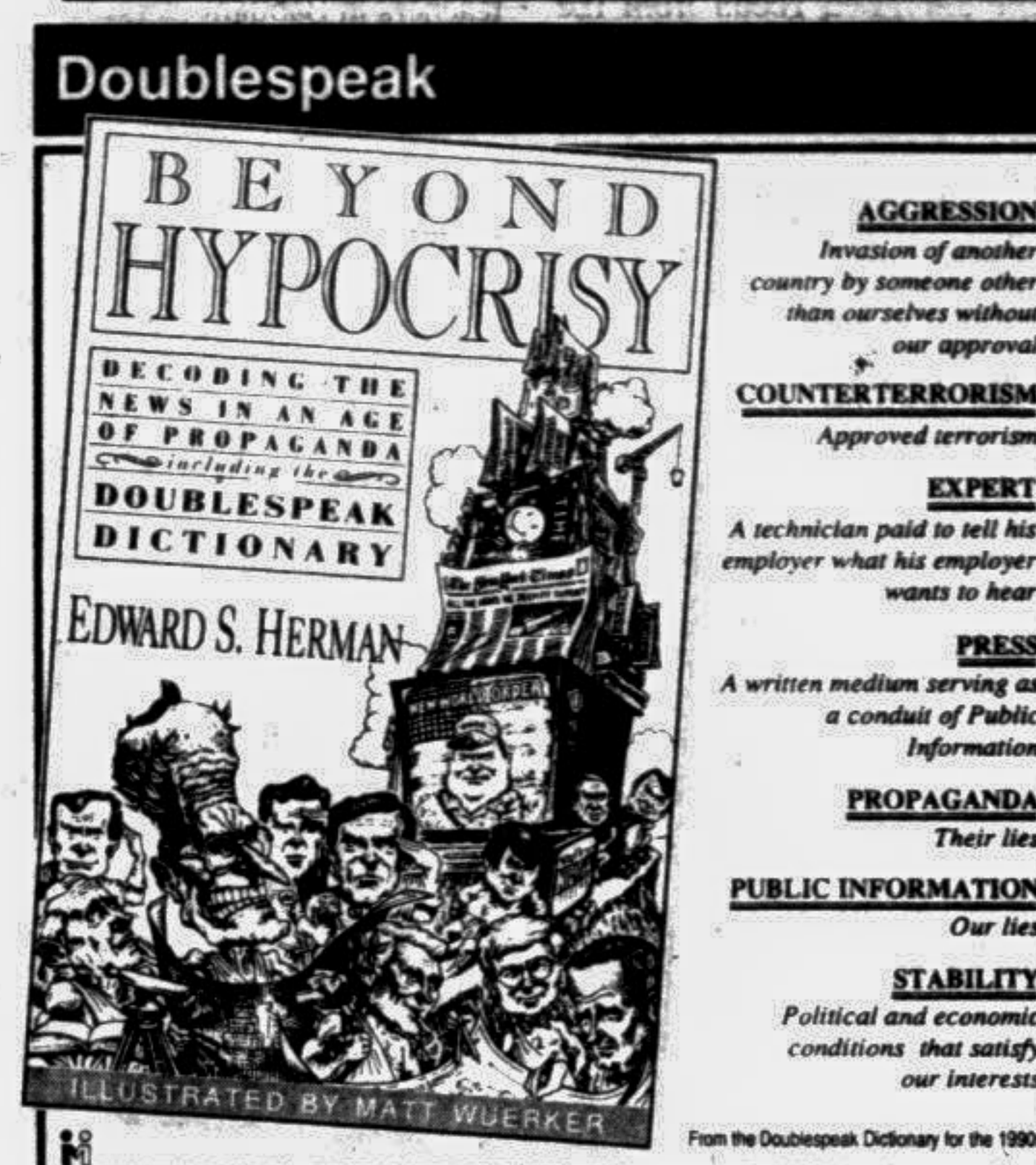
To return to our original theme, if there existed, within the framework of SAARC, effective supranational forums, representing different political views of member countries to deliberate upon such issues, this confrontational situation between two member nations need not have occurred. One should be happy if all this turned out to be a passing phenomenon, without adverse effect on economic and cultural cooperation among SAARC nations. But will such optimism be realistic?

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A Survivor's Guide to Media Doublespeak

by Daya Kishan Thussu

The US-led bombing of Iraq once again showed that the Western media employ double standards in their coverage of the Middle East. Most were not concerned about the legal authority behind the latest bombing of Iraq. How and why do the supposedly independent media allow themselves to be manipulated by governments in a democracy? Gemini News Service reviews a new book which exposes media doublespeak.



satellite reconnaissance. They seem unaware that invading a country's airspace and using satellite photography for spying contravene UN regulations. Thus a typical front page story reads: "Cloud over southern Iraq hindered US aerial and satellite reconnaissance".

In a recent book Beyond Hypocrisy: Decoding the News in an Age of Propaganda (South End Press, Boston) US academic Edward S. Herman highlights the deception and hypocrisy contained in the US government's "doublespeak" and the media's role in propagating it.

With Noam Chomsky, Herman has written extensively on the role of the US media in foreign policy. Their most notable collaboration was

Manufacturing Consent: Political Economy of Mass Media (1988), the definitive book on the working of Western media.

In his new book, Herman explores through essays, cartoons and a cross-referenced lexicon, doublespeak terms used in the language of US government policy.

The most important aspect of doublespeak, Herman says, "is the ability to lie, whether knowingly or unconsciously, and to get away with it; and the ability to use lies and choose and shape facts selectively, blocking out those that don't fit an agenda or programme".

In this thoroughly researched and lively book Herman finds media collaborating in the "double standard

and doublethink implicit in the official agenda".

Herman argues that the mainstream media not only allow the agendas of news to be bent in accordance with state demands and criteria of utility, they also accept presuppositions of the state without question. The attack on Iraq is but the latest in a series of interventions demonstrating US double standards which are analysed by Herman. In all the cases he cites — Vietnam, Nicaragua, Panama — the media collaborated by using uncritically the same language as the US administration did to justify its actions.

The media's gullibility and grovelling before the powerful occurs, argues Herman, "despite recognition by media personnel, in principle, that governments lie. But in practice, when dealing with their own governments, especially in the area of foreign policy and the military industrial complex, media personnel abandon or shy away from critical analysis".

The Cold War provided fertile ground for doublespeak. During the Reagan era, repeated claims of Soviet nuclear superiority, used to justify the arms race, were easily refutable at the time from Pentagon documents and testimony from Congressional committees. But, says Herman, "the press could never be bothered to examine these conflicting statements and try to assess their merits".

With the end of the Cold War, new adversaries had to be found or "manufactured". The record shows that the mass media failed to challenge the basis in reality of these supposed threats. In order to swing public opinion behind the Gulf War, the media were used to portray Saddam Hussein, a former ally, as a danger to world peace.

Dissenting voices are rarely heard and then they are dismissed as "polemical" in contrast to "objective" accounts by established professionals. Seemingly independent "experts" are brought on to comment on events. Few question their credentials or their biases.

No wonder books like this one are published by a non-profit collective. It challenges the fundamentals of the mainstream media. This is not new territory for the South End Press, which has produced, against all odds, some of the most penetrating criticism of US involvement in the Third World.

According to Herman, "dissent is excluded in the normal sourcing and processing of news, so that freedom of speech is perfectly compatible with systematic barriers to views that jar and threaten." Herman catalogues the words that are fundamental to doublespeak: such as "defence", "containment", "aggression", and "national security".

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, for example, was called "naked aggression" in the Western media but US aggressions in Granada, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Indochina, Herman says, "were, of course, properly clothed in a cloud of justifying rhetoric, and given our power and propaganda muscle, they were not even designated aggression by the Western intelligentsia and press".

"Similarly," he continues, "when states invade and occupy countries with our tacit approval and under our auspices, an invidious word like aggression, let alone naked aggression, is not applied".

South Africa's occupation of Namibia, Indonesia's invasion of East Timor in 1975 and Israel's attack on Lebanon in 1982, are cited as prime ex-

amples. Doublespeak reaches its full potential in times of war. Although official censorship of the media is expected and accepted, Herman argues media control is often achieved more easily.

"The propagation of big lies does not require Pentagon censorship; the mass media do it freely and naturally. Censorship deals with the little lies (whether a plane was shot down, or 10 rather than six body bags were shipped off today), not the big ones that portray our country as benevolent, fighting aggression, and eager for diplomatic solutions."

The Gulf War marked new heights in media manipulation. US television coverage of the war in Iraq was in what Herman calls a "propaganda format" designed to "show the war in a good light from the standpoint of the administration, Pentagon, and weapons manufacturers, keeping casualties and 'collateral damage' as far out of sight and mind as possible." Only afterwards did the military admit that the "smart bombs", whose accuracy was stressed to reassure the public, were not so smart after all.

The result of this doublespeak, argues the book, which should be required reading in all newsrooms and journalism schools, is that "The government has mastered the art of war-making propaganda, and the mass media have lost the capacity to challenge it by raising salient issues and forcing debate... so that matters of justice and law are kept out of the public view".

One major point beyond the remit of this volume which has profound implications for the developing world is the global reach of doublespeak. The US-dominated Western media have a virtual international monopoly in print, television and broadcasting news. With the growing power of satellite television and other information technologies, Third World dependence on Western news sources is further increased.

DAYA KISHAN THUSSU is Associate Editor of Gemini News Service.

To the Editor...

Defence personnel

Sir, Your editorial of 19 January 'A Welcome Decision' was a timely one. I, like many other readers of your esteemed daily, agree one hundred per cent with your opinion. In addition, I would like to voice, through your paper, the following suggestions:

- a) a way may be sought and found in stopping the members of the Armed Forces to be seen in public places like shops, offices, markets etc. in uniform while off duty. This is so in all other democratic countries;

- b) Armed Forces vehicles should not be used by their personnel, even on nominal payment, for private purposes; and
- c) Armed Forces police personnel should be allowed to do their duties without fear or favour.

Perhaps the above could set a trend in reducing such unfortunate happenings like the one at Bandarilla in future.

A Siddiqui
Banani, Dhaka

Learning and earning

Sir, Launching of the compulsory primary education

programme by the democratic government is indeed a bold step towards achieving country's socio-economic progress. Of course there are a lot of working children who never got any chance to attend a primary school. These children are providing financial assistances to their families. Now if they have to leave work to fulfil the state requirement of getting primary education then who'll fill-up the economic loss/gap of their respective families?

We would suggest authorities concerned for undertaking a scheme in the style of the former Pathakali model to impart primary education to the

poor children who can learn as well as earn at the same time and help their families with whatever meagre income they make.

M Zahidul Haque
Assistant Professor
Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka.

"Thanks, America"

Sir, Thanks, America, for bombing Iraq. Your bombers have done a wonderful job. Iraq was getting out of control and it is only Americans who can bring it to books. We condemn Iraq as it is a state that sponsors 'terrorism'.

Of course, when Israeli army walks into Lebanon, killing as it goes along, it is called "self defence". The expulsion of 415 Palestinians has also been done to "protect" the Jewish state. Can the destruction of the Iraqi nuclear plant by Israeli aircraft be called violation of Iraqi air space?

The Serbians are also protecting themselves by going into Bosnia and killing the unarmed Muslims and raping Muslim women. As the winter settles in Bosnia, hundreds are dying of hunger and cold. But then, we must give peace a chance and let the 'talks' proceed. The naughty Serbians must not repeat what they

have done.

One thing, America. Only a hundred years ago, the British ruled most of the world. Today, it is only a small country in the northern hemisphere. Going further down the history lane, who doesn't remember the Roman Empire? Rome is now the capital of Italy, and Italy's problems today are enough to keep itself busy. America today is the supreme power, but it may not be too long before it comes down, too. This is the rule of God.

Mrs Farida Alam
Wart, Dhaka.