

Wages Commission

We commend the forthrightness of the Bangladesh Employers' Association (BEA) in making its position clear on the recommendations made by the Wages Commission. On the face of it, it is one of rejection of the report. However, there is a hint in the statement issued on Saturday by the BEA president, M Anisuddowla that the matter is far from closed and that the Association would go along with what it called the 'reconstitution' of the commission in the interest of the growth of the national economy.

In the first place — and this is really the crux of the matter — the BEA has taken the line that the 'Wages and the Productivity Commission' was entrusted with substantive discussions with the employers who are in the best position to advise the authorities on the linkage between output of an industry or of a sector and salaries and other benefits of workers. Since, as the BEA chief said at the press conference, no such detailed talks, not to mention a negotiation, took place, one is obliged to infer that the Commission's recommendations are either largely arbitrary or based on testimony of selected individuals, if not both. Hence, just on the ground of modalities, the Commission's recommendations would deserve little attention from the Employers' Association or, for that matter, from a cross section of our people. What adds to this difficult situation is the premature publicity given to recommendations of the Commission that while workers in the public sector should get a minimum monthly wage of Taka 1,000, those in the private sector should be entitled to Taka 900 per month. It is far from clear how these figures reflect the ability of each industry to pay certain wages to its workers. After all, one would certainly ask if the minimum wage in an ailing jute factory be the same as in a profitable garment plant. This is certainly not the way of reviving the so-called sick industries even if they are provided with large credits and possibly undeserved financial assistance.

Two other, probably the most important, fundamental principles involved are simply this: Can the country, especially its limping industrial sector, afford a wage hike? Then, would it help the slow and uncertain growth of the private sector if the government takes it upon itself the responsibility of laying down the minimum wages in various sectors? To both these questions, immediate answers are in the negative, not only from within various sectors of the economy but also from donor nations and aid agencies. This is not to suggest that it should be a free-for-all situation for the private sector. There is undoubtedly a room for the introduction of guidelines for the industrial sector, based on close consultation between government and private entrepreneurs which, we are obliged to note, is virtually absent today.

The result is, instead of promoting some kind of a national consensus and thus paving the way for the revival of our economy, the authorities have created a mood of confrontation right across the national scenario. The Employers' Association has rightly opposed the proposed 48-hour shutdown planned by Sramik Karmachari Oikya Parishad (SKOP) which has also been rejected by the government, with Finance Minister Saifur Rahman describing it as "an anarchy on the labour front". While we would like the government to firmly deal with the proposed work stoppage by SKOP and the Employers' Association to initiate a fresh dialogue with the administration, we must indeed record our grave disappointment over the government's inept handling of the situation.

Commonwealth's New Role

The observance of the Commonwealth Day today has its special significance because of the phenomenal changes the world has undergone in a couple of years' time. This is on top of the various phases the organisation itself has gone through. There are people who would not rate the cementing force among the former colonies and their once-ruling nation very highly. Yet the Commonwealth remains to be a force to reckon with and even has acquired a new dimension — notwithstanding the scepticism — so far as the human rights issues are concerned. The watchdog role it played during the elections in Ghana, Bangladesh and Zambia has been most outstanding. And this is no mean task when an organisation is held so high in esteem by nations across the world.

True, Commonwealth aid can be considered marginal but the fact remains that it still is a big source of technical assistance, educational exchanges and cultural co-operation. All these are of vital importance for countries which are yet to break the poverty cycle. Particularly the technical co-operation — be it from the North to the South or just South-South — can make a whole lot of differences in the stages of development of countries of the developing world.

In this connection, it is desirable at this stage of the organisation to go for more and intense technical co-operation among neighbouring countries. In the area of education, the exchanges have always been highly fruitful and such co-operation will prove all the more necessary in a highly competitive world. The virtue of cultural co-operation has long been recognised, for this can bring nations closer through an understanding of each other in a strife-torn world.

What is however new in the whole gamut of co-operative efforts is that most of the Commonwealth countries are opting for free market economy. The new element in this effort is that it has opened up avenues for not only countries but also for the private-sector companies and organisations for cooperation and collaboration on a different footing but to their mutual benefits. Their shared experiences can go a long way to help the drive towards the market economy. So the Commonwealth has not arrived at a stage where it has outlived itself; rather, given the pace of change that is taking place, it can play a crucial role in bringing about peace and harmony in the process.

SOME people these days are talking quite openly about a third force in politics. These are the people who have veered round Dr Kamal Hossain during the past year or so. They are plainly dissatisfied with the current trend of politics. In their view both the party in power and the main opposition have failed to come up to the expectations that the people had reposed in them. Two years of the new variety of government and politics, which looked so very auspicious in March 1991, has only served to expose the weakness, perhaps the inability, of the existing forces to bring about a qualitative change in public affairs. Time has come for a third force to appear in the scene, distinct from both BNP and Awami League, in intent, purpose and in the mode of operation.

This is what has come out of all the parleys and meetings, held mostly under the auspices of the Democratic Forum. The Forum has been a hot topic ever since it emerged as a non-political group. To the party in power, it was at best a curiosity. To the main opposition, Forum activities were highly suspect from the beginning. No wonder, because Dr Kamal Hossain, the Forum leader, and for many years a part of the Awami League leadership, but in recent years a man fallen from grace, was seen to be the moving spirit of the organisation. From the AL point of view, it was not correct political behaviour. Dr Hossain, when accused of dis-

loyalty to party, and worse, had difficulty in explaining his position. The one persistent question which plagued him everywhere he went with the Forum flag in his hand was: Was he deserting his party? Was he going to form a new party? Was the Forum a prelude to the new party?

In recent weeks, because of certain moves taken by Dr Hossain and the Forum, those who have been questioning have started believing that a positive answer would be coming soon. A grand convention has been announced, and in this May Convention, a consensus is likely to emerge on the question of whether or not to form a new party or may be a new alliance of individuals, groups and parties, in short a conglomerate of the peripheral groups and forces. The prospect is being viewed with hope and expectancy by many, with scepticism by as many, and with a blank confusion by others.

The Third Force optimists are pinning their faith on the Left and the near Left forces who, in recent months, have been busy scanning their past, and formulating a policy for the future. They have nothing to lose, and something to gain, should a grand alliance prove politically viable. Some of the smaller parties may even be ready to lose their identity and merge with the larger body.

Others will be divided in their opinion. CPB is already divided on an internal issue. No body expects that even in the event of Dr Kamal Hossain leaving or being eased out of Awami League, a breakaway faction from the party will follow him. In that eventuality, he will find himself among a strange company, many of them beaming with robust hopes, and many others desperately clinging to new moorings because they have lost their old ones.

that suffered a self-appointed regime to rule for nine years, will gladly allow an elected government to run its course of five years. Alarm signals, however shrill and loud, will not rouse them, not by the present tokens. If, however, more mistakes are piled on present ones, if, on the economic front, non-performance become both incontrovertible and intolerable, if the problem of educated joblessness is not tackled well, plunging the so-

and believe.

As for the main Opposition, and its allies, it is less easy to say that they too have failed. They are doing their best, may be not in a very effective way. They want the Sangsad to be regarded with due respect. In other words, they want more power for the Sangsad but they cannot obtain what the party in power is reluctant to give. They have been able to expose the lack of sincerity of the government in implementing the programme of the Three Alliances. In fact, to judge from some of the utterances of some BNP spokesmen, the party recognises no obligation in this respect. They go the length of calling the pledge of action, thus virtually dissociating BNP from what was held out to be a joint pledge. This appears to be clearly a breach of faith with the people, and the Opposition taken together, excluding the Jamaat, has been making the most of this. But opportunism being a part of our political culture, people will not be overly scandalised when this is practised by the party in power. Where the Opposition has failed to gain maximum dividends politically is in exposing the government's poor performance on the economic front. If the Sangsad has been trivialised, the blame is shared by both the government and the Opposition. The scenario is

such that it calls for a more vigorous Opposition, not necessarily a different one.

The proposed Grand Convention may or may not lead to the launching of a new party or an alliance. If it does, it will almost certainly mean the demise of the Forum. If the Forum survives, as Dr Kamal Hossain says it will, it will involve restructuring. Meanwhile, Dr Hossain, as the leader of the new party of the new alliance, will not immediately help the cause of democracy, because his departure will hurt Awami League and that means, the strongest effective force working for democracy; indeed for all the values that Dr Hossain, as the convener of the Democratic Forum, has been espousing. It may hurt Dr Kamal Hossain himself, as far as his personal political career is concerned. The latest statement of AL General Secretary indicates that the party values his services. Granting that this is said in all sincerity, one doesn't see any reason why there shouldn't be a rapprochement, a reconciliation and a healing of the wounds.

When I say this, I speak with all humility, without any presumption of counselling any body. What will happen in the long run, no body knows. But in the short term view, the reconciliation holds the prospect of Dr Hossain once again playing a great role for his party, for the Opposition, and for the cause of democracy.

A Third Force in Politics

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

There are a few questions that appear relevant at the moment. Granted that political realignments are nothing new in this or any other country, is the moment ripe for such a move, from the point of view of public acceptance? This is a comparatively simple issue. A public opinion poll, conducted by a reliable agency, could elicit an answer. It is not safe to go by the turn out in public meetings, far less by the emotion and rhetoric released in a grand convention.

Next, about public frustration with the present government, and the present Opposition. There is no conclusive evidence that this has reached a boiling point. The BNP has been there on the saddle for two years. A people

cety into crime and violence of which there are positive signs already, if fundamentalist forces gain an upperhand — there are signs that they have nearly accomplished it — thus posing a threat to the basic idea of Bangladesh as a democratic country, committed to the ideal of a civil society, then and then only we will see signs of stirrings. Till that happens, a traditionally inert peasantry, a hopelessly disoriented working class, and other sectors of discontent will not lend their ear to a call for change. The common man is politically a sceptic. He looks upon a politician as an accomplished liar, appearing at certain hours and disappearing soon to pursue this selfish ends. It will be difficult to make him listen

The International Women's Day

It's Time for Reflection and New Pledges

by BB Bailyu

While most countries will celebrate this day with fanfare and jubilation, Bangladesh should reflect on long over-due measures on raising the status of women in this impoverished nation.

THE designation of March 8 (today) as the International Women's Day has, however, a long history of struggle and sacrifice by the women around the world. From time immemorial women have been subjected to all kinds of discrimination and have been meted out inhuman torture in the hands of their male counterparts. They have been looked down by men in almost every generation. And from time immemorial they have fought against all kinds of discrimination, humiliation, torture and indiscriminate killings. At times they succeeded in overcoming the various discriminations and enjoyed a wide range of rights, as in ancient Egypt where Cleopatra once ruled. In some societies, at times, they enjoyed considerable freedom and some measure of equality, but the struggle for freedom for all women for all times has been on for ever.

Modern women's struggle for freedom and liberty, and their fight against all forms of

discrimination are not, therefore, a new phenomena. Perhaps the recorded history of modern women's struggle for equality and justice popularly known as "Women's liberation" started with the French Revolution of 1789 when the demand for women's suffrage was voiced for the first time. Yet, as late as in 1990 the last canton of the Confederation of Switzerland gave their women voting rights — more than two hundred years after the clarion call made in Paris.

Nearly hundred years later, female workers of the textile industry in New York protested against the exploitive wages forced on them and demanded better working conditions. These women also

challenged the age old traditional stereotyping of women's role and demanded the right to work. The belief that women's place was within the four walls of the home and that her heaven lay "under her husband's feet" were unacceptable. The struggle for liberation from the "patriarchal status quo" continued for another ten years or so until the First Congress of the International Workers' Association adopted, in 1866, a resolution officially recognizing women's professional work. This then was the first official recognition of modern women's liberation movement.

It took another quarter of a century for the International Women's Day to come into being. It was Clara Zetkin, a member of the International

Garment Workers' Union, who, in 1889, called for an annual celebration to honour the movement of women's rights and freedom. At the forefront of these rights was the right to work and the protection of mothers and children. At the Second International Conference of Socialist Women held in Copenhagen in 1910 a resolution proposing an Annual Women's Day was adopted. Some countries of Europe thus celebrated the International Women's Day for the first time ever in March 1911.

The importance of an annual women's day was finally recognised by the United Nations nearly sixty-five years later. In 1977, the General Assembly passed a resolution calling upon countries to nomi-

inate any day of the year as the United Nations Day for Women's Rights and International Peace. Another two years passed before the first legal framework for the protection of the rights of women was drawn up by the United Nations. In 1979 the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women which outlines the basic requirements for the liberation of women from total subjugation was proclaimed by the General Assembly. Until 1992 more than hundred countries had ratified this Convention that commits governments to take measures "to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and

fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men".

While the International Women's Day was originally envisaged by its advocates to draw attention to the plight of women, particularly working women, it has now become a day to reflect on the progress made in women's emancipation as well as to identify the barriers to women's forward march.

The United Nations has, since the mid seventies, held three World Conference on Women. The Fourth World Conference on Women is scheduled to be held in Beijing in 1995, coinciding with the silver jubilee of the United Nations.

Between now and 1995, is the time for Bangladesh to reflect on the status of women in this country and take "appropriate measures" as enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women which it has ratified.

Briton Brings Years of Experience to Getting Bosnia Relief Convoys through

by Caroline Godwin, Central News, London

southern Sudan. There were all these trucks floundering in the mud. Looking at this, I knew my experience and knowledge could contribute," Ian explained.

Seeing the desperate plight of the Sudanese and knowing he could do something to help them, he embarked on a course which has dominated his life ever since. "At the time I had two children who were very fit and healthy, and a very good relationship with my wife." Since Ian began to devote himself to relief work, he has not been without its hardships, involving painful separations from his family. But with the help and support of his wife Anne, he has succeeded in his goal of making a positive difference to the lives of needy people.

Recently he returned to the former Yugoslavia after spend-

ing Christmas and the New Year with Anne and their three children, Stuart, 11 Roy, and Jamie, 4, at the family's Paisley home.

Ian has been working in the region since late last summer, coordinating the supply of food purchasers and donors, and making sure it arrives in the right place and in the right quantity.

His job has also entailed routing the convoys of aid trucks and ensuring they are used in the most effective way "within the security constraints".

The logistics of his work are dauntingly difficult because of the complexity of the conflict in the region, involving various forces, with territory repeatedly changing hands.

The situation changes daily, and the diplomacy needed to negotiate a safe passage for the trucks would "try the pa-

tience of job", as one aid worker put it.

But softly-spoken Ian Henderson has been remarkably successful in maintaining the flow of relief convoys.

With the Balkan winter now taking an icy, potentially deadly hold on the region, the food, blankets, clothing and plastic sheeting the convoys supply are all that stands between starvation and freezing to death for hundreds of thousands of civilians.

Ian is modest about his role, but a leading UNHCR official said he had never met a man quite like him before.

"He is a true philanthropist, who inspires us all with his strength, compassion and great sense of humour," said the official from the UN's Zagreb headquarters.

Speaking in Bosnia late last month, Ian described how after leaving Paisley Grammar

School he began a degree course in engineering.

"But I dropped out and went to work for a car rental company. Then in 1974 I bought a Ford transit van for 25 pounds. I used to do removals from tenement buildings," he says.

His business grew until he had his own fleet of trucks.

Since Ian's involvement in relief work around the world began, Anne Henderson has taken responsibility for the day-to-day running of the company.

"She takes all the decisions, but we have a very good and loyal staff who have been with me for many years — they are a real team who I'm very lucky to have," continued Ian.

He also insisted on expressing his admiration for the courage of the aid truckers — most of whom come from the United Kingdom.

"Some get a really rude

awakening when they come out here. They are very brave driving into places like Sarajevo when the bullets are flying is not a pleasant experience. I have every respect for them. They are doing a marvelous job."

But the truckers — the aptly named 'unsung heroes' — who daily travel into some of the most dangerous and unpredictable areas, are not the only ones risking their lives. Ian often accompanies them — his is not just a desk job.

Asked what had been the most rewarding aspect of his work in Yugoslavia, he replied: "For me it is the reaction of the children when they see the trucks coming into their town or village."

His most terrible experience, and one which will always haunt him, was the day a group of children he had come to know were hit by mortar fire in Sarajevo.

"They were just standing waiting, as they often did, outside a particular building to meet the truckers. Some were killed and others horribly injured," he recalled. — LPS

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.

Reemployment on contract

Sir, Acute unemployment is prevailing in the country. The employed are also suffering from frustration for lack of promotion prospect and irregularity in promotions where there is scope. In such a situation some senior bureaucrats, in reaching the age of superannuation, are managing to get re-employment on contract basis. The services of these bureaucrats are not indispensable. They are also the technical people. Hence their re-employment is only causing concern to the serving officers and this concern is very genuine.

While the BNP government came to power two years ago, they were against any re-em-

ployment. It is not understood for what earthly reason they seem to have yielded to the pressure of interested individuals. This is rather tarnishing the image of the Government. Now that some precedences have been created, those who are on the verge of retirement may well exert all the influence they can muster to get re-employment. Hence it is felt that this practice should be stopped forthwith.

Mrs Montaz Jahan Fulbari, Sylhet

Mosquito menace

Sir, Of late mosquitoes are making the life of the city dwellers miserable. Dhaka City Corporation should do something in this regard to reduce this menace urgently.

Garments industry in residential area

Sir, Malibagh Chowdhurypara is a residential area. A good number of educated middle-class people reside in this locality. But a step has been taken to set up a garments industry in the locality. It may be mentioned that the area where the garments

Increasing rate of crime

Sir, In a news item "Monthly round-up" published in your paper on 2.3.93, you have correctly pointed out the mounting rise in the crimes committed in Dhaka city. I am here to add that in villages and at the district level muggings,

robberies and dacoities are rampant and very frequent now-a-days. Very recently, my old parents were robbed by six or seven young men. They entered the house by cutting the grill and breaking the window in the early hours of the day during sehari time. Poor old parents of mine were bound up and at point of guns and knives were robbed of everything including the valuables they had in the house. Most pathetic part of the robbery is that the dacoits even took the spectacles, sandals and shoes of the couple. The culprits told them not to report to the police, otherwise they would again come and kill both of them. We also advised them not to go to the law and order authority, because earlier in 1973 they were robbed in the same manner and police could not or did not do anything about that. So what is the fun of going to the police and make their own lives target for the miscreants? Anyway, we made an alternate proposal to our parents — to shift to Dhaka and to apply for a permission to keep firearms to protect themselves.

My question is how many people Dhaka city can afford to shelter because of this security reasons? How can you uproot these elderly people from their own surroundings, and their own home? All their lives they have been independently living in their own simple way, in a peaceful atmosphere, in a less polluted area. Moreover, most of them would not be able to afford an independent house like they are used to live in. Also if they shift, who would look after their house in the village? Is there no way out to control the rate of crimes — these freestyle dacoities, mugging etc? Why can't the law and order authorities take enough measure and action to protect and give security to those helpless people who pay taxes for running the administration? We always hear speeches, lectures by the religious leaders, politicians on sanctity of Ramadan. But self-restraint (sajangam) which is the real meaning and teaching of Islam for this holy month means what to whom? Munira Khan Green Road, Dhaka