

Whatever Happened to Global Conscience?

by Shaheen Anam

For the women of Bosnia, just being raped does not mean the end of their suffering. There is more horror in store for them. These women, when they somehow escape or are rescued cannot go back to their families. The family is too ashamed to take them back. The nightmare continues

ONCE again, the world is a mute spectator to the atrocity being committed to a particular community. The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, once a part of Yugoslavia, are being systematically eliminated. They are being deprived of their right to life and liberty by the Serbian forces who believe that the Bosnian Muslim population do not belong there. For the last one year they have been embroiled in a bitter struggle for domination and the world has watched the genocide of a people. In this big tragedy, another tragedy unfolds — a tragedy without precedence in terms of barbarity and cruelty. The women of Bosnia are being raped; they are humiliated in the worst possible way, being deprived of their honour and chastity and freedom. It is said that rape is an outcome of any war. But no, not on this occasion. This time a new dimension has been added to rape which has no precedence either in its planning or in its execution. This time rape is being used as a weapon of war. According to limited reports reaching us, Bosnian women are being held captive and repeatedly raped till they are impregnated. And, as if that was not enough, they are again kept in captivity till they give birth to the child — this is done to prevent the women from aborting the foetus. Take a minute to think of the implications of these actions! The purpose is to "ethnically cleanse" a whole race. To make sure that from now onwards children born to Bosnian women should only be fathered by the Serbs. Who else should then be the victim of this sinister plan but the women of Bosnia, of course?

There are various reports on the extent and number of rapes already committed. Some reports say it is between 20 to 30 thousand women. It is said that the names of 15 thousand rape victims have been compiled. The rape victims range in age from as young as nine to elderly women of 60. The sexual perversion of the act just boggles the mind and to think that some people actually sat and planned this leaves one aghast. When the Second World War ended, and the Nazi forces were defeated, we thought the world had seen the end of such kind of barbarity. That, hopefully, people will never again be subjected to genocide just because of their colour, race or ethnicity. Alas that was not to be. Again and again we have seen a whole race of people being persecuted either because they belong to a certain religious group, or are ethnically different, or do not have the right skin colour. One such example is, of course, Bangladesh, where three million people were executed just because they were Bengalees and wanted self-determination for themselves. It has been estimated that 200,000 women were also raped in Bangladesh, most of whom remained untraced and undocumented. Historically, women have always played the price of war by being raped. When a kingdom was conquered, one of the agenda the soldiers had besides looting was raping the women of the vanquished people. Women pay this price of

war even though they have no influence on the decision to wage it. There has been many a research on why men rape women. Though the war situation is different, basically it is from the same sense of superiority that men feel they have over women. It is the patriarchal nature of our society that gives men the right to humiliate and make women powerless. Many laws and legislations have been passed to prevent rape. It is now considered a capital crime and can carry a death penalty. But in a war situation, when all the normal values and morals break down, a certain group of men think they have the licence to perpetrate this atrocity on women with complete immunity, like a horde of hyenas descending on a pack of lambs. For the women of Bosnia, just being raped does not mean the end of their suffering. There is more horror in store for them. These women, when they somehow escape or are rescued cannot go back to their families. The family is too ashamed to take them back. The nightmare continues for them. The burden of shame is so heavy that family members either drive them away or kill them. Yes, according to news reports, they are brutally murdered by members of their own families. They, in effect, are given the death sentence instead of the rapists. They again have to pay for a crime they have not committed or have no control over. This is a classic example of victimising

the victims. Just sit back and think what this means. First the women of Bosnia are being made widows, their homes are being destroyed, their children are being killed. And that is not enough for their tormentors. They are being raped, kept prisoners till they become pregnant which means repeated rapes and every other kind of humiliation imaginable. Then when they somehow dare to start thinking the nightmare is over, comes the most brutal of all, to be killed by their own families. How is such an act committed and by whom? Is it the brother she has played with as a young girl? Or is it the father who used to take her around on his back just the other day? Does he shoot her or is it done by strangulation? One wonders. Just think of the psychological trauma of these women. As it is, being raped is one of the worst nightmares that most women have. Research has shown that most women almost never recover from that horrible feeling of helplessness, of being made to feel powerless. For the women of Bosnia, rape is like a double edged sword. Even if she somehow escapes from the clutches of her rapists, she cannot escape the taboo, the customs and the social norms of her society where her worth is only within her body. When her body is defiled, she becomes worthless. While my strongest condemnation is for the Serbians

serious than the one facing the women of Bosnia? The other issue we should not forget in this whole tragic drama is about the children who are being born to these women. What kind of life will they have? What can the future hold for them? Somebody will have to start taking responsibilities. If women are the innocent victims of this senseless war, one can only imagine the humiliation, the insults and the degradation these children will be subjected to. What can one expect from a society where women are murdered for being raped? Their children are condemned before they are born! Although the news of the war is still on, we have stopped getting any report on the rape victims. Probably this does not make dramatic news anymore. Twenty thousand rape victims do make news. But sporadic rape here and there do not. Soon all will be forgotten and, worse still, even forgiven. The world leaders will shake their heads and announce that though what happened to the women of Bosnia is very unfortunate, yet we have to be realistic and look to the future and towards reconciliation. The women of Bosnia, those who survive from the clutches of the rapists as also from the wrath of their family members, have to accept this as their fate. But as women, should we allow this to go unpunished? Should we let it go as just another unfortunate outcome of war? Think about it. Every time we acquiesce, we surrender a bit of our dignity, our honour and our quest for equality. The writer is a programme officer with UNDP, and writes two regular columns for this paper.

Why Harkin Bill?

The Child Labour Deterrence Act, 1993 — also known as the Harkin Bill and made law only recently — aims at curbing child labour in developing countries. Even before its placing before the US Senate and the House, the bill set alarm bells ringing across the countries where children are employed in large numbers and forced to work. The hardest hit obviously will be countries like Bangladesh thriving on child labour in garments manufacturing. Garment factories here obviously are not going to be amused. Already resentments have been expressed over the US measure. However, the pith of the argument in favour of child labour is that the children now employed will turn into social parasites once they have been out of job. Understandable though the US concern is, there are still one or two vital points the Senator concerned seems to have missed while tabling the bill. Our society is neither sufficiently developed nor egalitarian to afford complete abolition of child labour. No law can prevent this social curse when abject poverty is the order of the day. Yet the nature of child labour varies: it is one thing for a child to lend a helping hand to his/her parents and quite another to do the hazardous and hard jobs at welding factories and automobile workshops. Jobs at a garment factory should not necessarily have been as much arduous at any rate.

Yet the crux of the problem is exactly there. This is not for nothing that a great number of children — most of them girls — have been employed in garment factories. A nominal pay, overtime and difficult working atmosphere often mark their service. Children, girls and women are the most vulnerable section of society and they can be exploited without the risk of protests. It is universally known that the country is burdened with a huge number of eligible unemployed people and their labour also can be bought cheap. But their employment entails with it the obligation to abide by the industrial laws and factory rules. And, while considering the fact of child labour, it has also to be remembered that employment in a garment factory is a far better option than begging in the streets.

Evidently, the garment factories here will have to improve their performance in other possible areas if they are not willing to lose the market abroad, specially in the US. On this score the reasoning has to be based on other considerations as well. And those are the considerations we ought to bring into focus. Children below 15 years of age normally should find themselves in schools. But living standard of majority of our population is so low that their children either have to completely opt out of any such facility or drop out soon.

Nor will those children driven out of job now find the world more receptive. Some of them will simply have no place to turn to. This humanitarian question deserves close attention. The telepress conference dealt with in the report carried in this newspaper yesterday, happily, has come up with a few suggestions that include funding parents for enrolling their kids in schools, refixing budget priorities, increased international assistance to improve living standard of the people and enforcement of laws against child abuse. But the key question is how the funding of parents will be done. In fact, this is the essence of North-South dialogue and over decades things have moved but little. What, however, can be done with less complication is that the working children can be brought under a national scheme combining education and work together, without affecting any. International help and NGO assistance can be sought for this purpose.

Breaking the Educational Impasse

Next Friday some 12 thousand meritorious students would sit for tests designed to sift 1325 lucky ones from among them for admission to the medical colleges of the country. If there were enough accommodation in those colleges, nearly all of the 12 thousand could qualify for admission — on the basis of their academic excellence. The admission tests are a device to eliminate worthy candidates in order that the crowd fit the incommensurate vessel.

It is well understood that the 12 thousand bulk is not exclusively a load on the medical colleges' conscience for these and some thousands more of the best of the new Science undergraduates of the past year have been doing their round of hitting luck at the doors of the different universities and particularly the BUET. This is patently a waste of education and talent that cannot but hurt the nation as well as individuals and their families in a serious manner.

The problem can be engaged through a two-pronged attack. Opportunities should be increased to lure the bulk of better students to different technical lines, lessening the pressure on the degree-level science and professional education. The second effort should go to making accommodation for taking on some thousands of more students by the universities.

The above is more easily said than done. The main obstacle to making the first approach rewarding is the abominable practice of treating pre-degree specialisations as half-way education and the students passing out from pre-degree institutions literally as unemployables. As things are with the many diploma-level courses, no truly meritorious student would ever choose one of these.

Next comes the question of why should the worthy and willing student be denied a university education? We don't think the government has a right answer there. Our progress in making basic education universal is all too unenviable. If then we cannot also take care of the few talented ones that are thrown up by the small base and come past many an ungenerous socio-economic factor bearing upon them, the justification of there being an authority is largely lost.

Behind what can rightly be called an educational impasse stares, very unmistakably, the question of unemployment. The government, more exactly the society at large, is in no shape to put to job the doctors and engineers and agronomists and scientists our universities already churn out. The parents are bent on seeing their sons and daughters through the university so that they can find a vocation. The government is not keen on boosting the number of qualified unemployed people.

We cannot wish this problem away. But so far no serious attempt has been made to successfully engage it to the benefit of the students and their families and the nation.

THE ideological conflict between two rival factions of CPB (Communist Party of Bangladesh) has now taken the shape of tussle over party assets. Most unfortunate. Reformists and the hardliners had drawn the line but the final dissolution of the party awaits the approval of the delegates conference scheduled in May next.

CPB, like all other parties, has both admirers and critics but was always considered to be one based on ideology. It is a party over 40 years old but the communist movement in this land started almost 60 years ago with the formation of Communist Party of India in 1921. In fact, the Communist Party of Pakistan with Sajjad Zahir as its first secretary general was launched by CPI in the late forties. In spite of many aberrations, it must be admitted that the democratic and nationalist movements of this country owe a great deal to this party though most of the times it had to work from the underground. It is they who, for the first time, tried to organise the trade unions and the peasants in this land. Many political intellectuals came out of their fold. Admittedly, the communist movement is international in

Can't CPB Maintain a Unity in Diversity?

by Mominul Huq

character. Events in the international scene, particularly those in former Soviet Union or communist China had their due influences on the communist parties here and everywhere. Once Soviet Union was their fatherland. With Mao-Tse-Tung's assertion of "Let hundred flowers blossom" there arose polycentrism in the movement. Without going into the merits or demerits of "mono-centrism" or "polycentrism", what we saw in the sixties — a clear division in the communist parties of the sub-continent. One group took the Soviet line, the other became the camp followers of the Communist Party of China. The latter, in erstwhile East Pakistan and also in Bangladesh, split up into various factions ranging from ultra-leftism to extreme-reactionism even to the extent of collaborating with military regimes. Honorable exceptions are still there but they could not consolidate themselves into a party with single agenda. Some, amongst them, masquerading as communists, had chosen different outfits for advancing their political programmes. But in any case, po-

litical demeanour of many of them do not fit well with image of dedicated communists. CPB, however, has a different history. It remained an organised party. In the sixties when the movement for self-determination started gaining ground with the launching of 6-point programme by Awami League, CPB and its mass and front organisations immediately lent their support to the nationalist movement. This was because CPB conceived that in the given dialectics of situation the fight for democracy and that for socialism were synonymous. This, of course, was a corollary of Khrushchev's prudent stand of peaceful co-existence with US for averting the possible danger of nuclear holocaust. Pro-Soviet communist parties, in the third world, at that time identified themselves with the nationalist movements. This is a great historical reality that can hardly be ignored. In our liberation war, CPB remained with Awami League — the prime political force at that time. CPB's role, after independence, came under

scathing criticism as they did not advance any programme against the ruling Awami League. Instead they were instrumental in forming the "tripartite alliance" with the regime and ultimately got merged with one-party "BAKSAL". CPB, at that time, under dictator of their international bosses cared little to see the realities at home. But CPB again became active in the movements against General Zia and General Ershad. During the anti-Ershad movement, they, though a component of 15-party alliance, tried to bring about a closer understanding between Awami League and BNP as they did in the formation of United Front in 1954. CPB's past is yet more glorious in so far as dedication for political faith and development of political culture is concerned. Often working from behind the scene, they supplied the sinews of democratic struggles. Many of their leaders underwent immeasurable sufferings and privations. Personalities like Yakub Mia

(Bora Mia), Ramesh Das Gupta, Khoka Roy, Gyan Chakraborty, Moni Singh, Ila Mitra, Alif Hossain, Abdul Quader Chowdhury whose lives of sufferings for building up a party which many of their political descendants are now too ready to bury. They are simply matchless in matters of sufferings only comparable to Congress leaders and workers produced by Mahatma Gandhi — that too from "Ashrams". Their sufferings not only helped their party, many non-communist nationalists were inspired by the ideals of their personal lives. It is really beyond comprehension that the untold sufferings of countless communist leaders and workers should be rewarded this way by the very party they suffered for. Yes, Soviet Union does no more exist. The communist regimes of East Europe had been ousted. These happenings had brought about tremendous change in the thought-processes of the communist parties all over the world. CPB cannot be an exception. But are not CPI and CPI (M) in existence in India? The roles be-

ing played by these two parties on recent happenings of Babri mosque demolition and Bombay riots earned for them universal admiration. The absence of these parties would have left a vacuum — both political and intellectual in the face of rising fundamentalism. These parties too have internal problems — but they could successfully maintain a unity in diversity till now. Does necessity of reform in the changed circumstances essentially call for dissolution of the party? Cannot the hardliners be little bit flexible to accommodate the exigency of situation? Historic responsibilities may befall many but few can display wisdom in accomplishing them. Parties may come and go but death of any political ideology cannot be declared with finality. History had proved it time and again. If CPB leaders of both groups be little bit respectful of their political ancestors and refrain from washing dirty lines publicly, they will help themselves and the nation. Already the political parties, because of their own doings, have fallen in the esteem of the people. No more grist should be added to the mills of the adversaries of clean politics to grind.

A potent brew of people, poverty and pestilence could trigger upheavals in the ecologically-brittle uplands of Asia.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), these steep, marginal, often treeless and overgrazed lands already support six out of every 10 Asians. But growing number of migrants, from job-short and crowded lowlands, are intensifying the pressure to snapping point.

Many uplanders are subsistence farmers. Others are indigenous forest dwellers. Majority come from ethnic minorities. These tribals or aboriginals are dirt poor.

Farming the thin upland soil brings in less than US\$140 yearly — way below already harsh poverty lines.

Isolation and lack of education deprive them of a voice in air-conditioned budget offices in cities from New Delhi to Jakarta and Port Moresby. They often become "afterthought" of agriculture programmes," observes Kenneth Brooks of Minnesota

Poverty Spells Doom for Asia's Uplands

A Special Correspondent writes from Bangkok

Disease constitutes a form of 'ethnic cleansing' in the uplands

University who prepared for FAO a monograph on upland conservation.

Malnutrition and disease take a savage toll in upland communities — often two or three days trek from the nearest doctor. Protein deficiency is common as wild game and domestic livestock are scarce. Yearly, thousands from these ethnic clusters die from lack of safe drinking water and other preventable water-related diseases.

"Disease constitutes a form of 'ethnic cleansing' in the uplands," says FAO Regional Representative A Z M Obaidullah Khan. "Mortality rates do not stem from deliberate policy. But the results are as brutal and deadly as the 'ethnic cleansing' we see in Yugoslavia."

Poverty drives these communities to consume limited upland natural resources: forests, land and fodder. This drain unleashes an ecological backlash on lowland communi-

ties. Adverse effects include: landslides, mudflows, flash-floods, clogging of channels and reservoirs, pollution of water supplies and altered streamflow patterns. Deforestation also condemns at least one species of bird, animal or plant into extinction daily.

"These people emerge into the headlines only when ecological disaster erupts as a result of their struggle for survival," says Dr Y S Rao, FAO's top forester in Asia.

He cites the 1988 disaster in Southern Thailand. There, flashfloods and mudflows cascaded from ecologically-ravaged uplands. Some 236 people were killed and almost a thousand injured.

The Philippines provided a deadlier carbon copy of the Thai disaster in 1991. After

torrential rains lashed denuded uplands of Leyte province, flashfloods swept through the unprepared city of Ormoc. In less than 24 hours almost 8,000 people were killed.

At present, there are few incentives for uplanders to adopt technologies for sustainable agriculture. Most do not even have title to the land they till. Therefore, they see no point in plans for the long term.

Others argue that conservation benefits are cornered by downstream residents. Uplanders are not compensated for their efforts to protect watersheds or curb soil erosion.

Governments provide only a trickle of resources for these politically powerless people. Infrastructure in upland areas

is primitive. Few roads link them to markets — and allow technicians to reach and serve them. Distribution systems are inadequate. The little credit available is strapped with exorbitant interest rates.

"Survival is the all-consuming task for these impoverished people," says FAO's Mr Khan. "Many are simply concerned about today. Most are unable to take necessary steps to improve their children's future."

FAO cautions this threat can erupt in other Asian and Pacific countries. If this ecological time bomb is to be defused, "human social systems must be merged in a compatible way with the natural ecosystems of uplands," Dr Rao stressed.

To reverse this destructive benign neglect, governments will have to adapt policies that meet the food and natural resource needs of upland inhabitants. Land use practices there urgently need to be improved.

What remains of upland forests must be managed in a sustainable manner. Spreading land degradation has to be curbed.

These require active and willing participation of upland inhabitants. In fact, exclusion of decimated minorities from decision-making is a major reason why the upland community problems fester — and are deepening.

Upland conservation measures require communal efforts. Organising these isolated groups is difficult. "It is like stitching together loose sheets of sand," FAO officials stress.

To achieve upland conservation, FAO recommends that governments address the poverty of upland inhabitants and deal with root causes, not just the symptoms of upland problems.

Governments should also protect and rehabilitate critical areas and develop advocacy for conservation. It should set up the appropriate support institutions and emphasise the sustainability of upland projects.

— Depthnews Asia

To the Editor...

WASA bill

Sir, I am an account holder of Dhaka WASA. Following the usual practice I prepared water bill for the months of January and February, '93 based on meter reading taken on 28.2.93 under 'Self Billing System' and presented the bill to Agrant Bank, Mahakhali branch in cash on 5.3.93. The bank, instead of receiving the bill said that the system had changed and the Deptt would take the reading and send computer made bill to consumers for payment and that the bank had instruction not to receive any bill under 'Self Billing System' after 15.2.93. There may be little objection to the department's changing procedures. But such a change

should have been made known well in advance with a timely notice through newspaper, which was not done in this case. The consumers would not have been harassed in the exercise of preparing the bill and running to bank with the bill and cash and return disappointed.

The department knows it best whether this system of self billing worked satisfactorily or not. But as for myself, I can say that it was very much convenient for me and I prepared bills exactly on the basis of meter reading taken at the close of every two months and made payment regularly.

It is my sad experience to find that the Deptt at times failed to prepare bills bi-

monthly and send those to consumers in time for payment.

As the department has taken a decision to prepare computer bill, consumers would not and must not object to it. However, consumers' expectation to get the computer bills periodically and timely has to be materialised objectively in the new system.

H M Shaikh, New DOHS, Mahakhali, Dhaka

Rajuk's pending cases

Sir, I applied to Rajuk in 1985-86 for a residential plot of land under its Banani-Baridhara scheme, with initial payment in foreign exchange. It is more than six years

now, and no decision has been communicated to me, nor the deposit refunded. In fact my application was approved as announced in the press advertisement.

Numerous visits and written reminders had no effect. Rajuk's insolence is such that it does not even acknowledge registered letters, not to speak of responding to the complaint. Letters to the Ministry are subjected to the same fate: silence. The issue is raised in the press from time to time, but as usual, nothing happens.

How long will it take to dispose of thousands of such pending cases, and specially those of officials now retired? The same situation prevails in the T&T in regard to new telephone connections: com-

plete silence. Matters have not improved since the elected government came into power. Facing microphones and loud-speakers do not solve problems.

Can we expect some positive action? How can the administration expect to cope with the development projects when arrears pile up year after year?

An applicant, Dhaka

Investment allowance

Sir, It is well known that saving and investment are very low in the economy of Bangladesh. Hence it is the declared policy of the govern-

ment to promote these. It is felt that existing fiscal policy should be modified to achieve that end. In the last budget, investment allowance was fixed at 20% of gross income.

In Pakistan time this investment allowance was 40%. For the lower income brackets at least, the level of investment allowance should be raised sufficiently. It is suggested that it should be fixed at 50% for those having a gross income of up to Taka five lakh. This will provide necessary incentive towards more saving and investment. Will the Ministry of Finance and NBR do something in this regard in the next budget?

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury, Dhaka Cantt.