

Human Rights in The West

A regional conference of some 49 Asian-Pacific countries on human rights, just held in Bangkok, has done well in calling upon the West to put its own house in order before criticising the alleged abuses in the Third World.

The meeting in the Thai capital is one of the series of regional ones which are to formulate a common programme for the UN-sponsored World Conference on Human Rights to be held in Vienna in June.

There are grave doubts if regional meetings can evolve a plan of action that covers all the conflicting requirements and, what is more important, produce a mechanism that protects the human rights in all different parts of the world, regardless of race, religion and nationalities of victims.

In this context, the call from Bangkok to the West to set its own house in order assumes immediate and urgent significance.

Here, we are looking at the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina where, right in the heart of Europe, the worst possible violations of human rights have been taking place day after day. As we have reported in our news columns and commented in editorial and opinion pieces, people in this troubled zone have been murdered, evicted from their homes and moved to makeshift concentration camps, children separated from their parents and, last but not the least, countless women raped by Serbian soldiers and civilians. All this has been happening in the name of "ethnic cleansing", the aim being to wipe out Muslims in that region and to replace them with nameless faceless Serbs. Nothing like this has ever happened anywhere since Nazi atrocities committed during the World War.

If Bosnia tops the list in terms of human rights abuses, other areas where the West is involved cannot escape the attention of the international community, not to mention the United Nations. Several hundred Palestinians from the occupied territories, deported by Israel and now living in severe winter in a no man's land on the border of Lebanon represent another gross violation of human rights. All kinds of technical and political arguments can be advanced as to why Tel Aviv cannot let these deportees return to their homes. But we cannot be convinced that Washington has brought enough pressure on Israel to tackle the problem in a just and fair way.

The list does not end here. Neo-Nazi groups in the new unified Germany have gone after immigrant and guest workers; the extreme rightist political groups in France have been harassing African and Asian workers; and, even in parts of Western Europe, racialism, in one form or another, seems to have gained a new lease of life.

All this doesn't mean that in turning to the alarming situation that exists within the West today, we should play down the worst form of human rights abuses in countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In fact, judging by press reports from Bangkok, two countries which were particularly vocal in their criticisms of the West were Iran and Myanmar, which have dismal performance in the observance of human rights. There is nothing surprising that they should use the meeting in the Thai capital to divert the attention from their internal situation. They may well do the same, perhaps in co-operation with a few other countries, at the meeting in Vienna in June.

One way of turning the conference in the Austrian capital is to make some kind of a distinction between the denial of democratic political rights, as we see in Myanmar, and the abuses of human rights of countless individuals or groups of individuals on ethnic and religious grounds as we witness in Bosnia and, to a lesser degree, in parts of the West.

Unless this distinction is made, the situation in Bosnia may just bracketed with the denial of human rights in some Third World countries. Between now and June next year, the international community must evolve a plan of action that changes the scenario in Bosnia. The time is running out. And responsibility clearly lies with the West.

How to Realise Phone Arrears

Ten thousand telephone lines are to be disconnected in the 15 districts of the Chittagong division for nonpayment of bills. Two thousand connections have already been snapped in the port-city itself. We have nothing but welcome for such right yet much belated action. The outstanding bills amounting to Taka 20 crore is paltry in national terms but is a gigantic pull towards collapse when correctly treated as one single organisation's problem. Telephones, to thrive and improve, must be able to pay their way and even contribute to the state coffers. A failure to do so would only result in erratic and unreliable service costing the nation so much in economic terms.

To make the operation a success, care should be taken to see that all defaulters are equally treated. Evidently most of telephone subscribers are tops in the society — the influence of some of them knowing no bound. And then a big part of the defaulters are the government's own establishments and offices of private organisations having more power than government agencies, specially in regions far from Dhaka. Any slackening of the operation in any one case of such would render the operation ineffective.

There is another side, perhaps a more serious one that relates to ensuring that not one obliging subscriber is unduly harassed, even as a matter of mistake. This part of the operation would prove the strongest for the simple reason that the telephone department — its commercial and purchasing sections in particular, is not at all immune to corruption and inefficiency.

The matter of billing and collecting has long been a mine of corruption for all government organisations. This all-pervasive disease will need sustained and hyperpotent medication to heal. Fear and favour should be the two words that must go out of the dictionary of those charged with fighting the disease. And we don't as yet know if some people have indeed been charged to treat this malaise, the anti-corruption people can be counted out for they are not on record to have done anything against culprits connected with government in power — any government — or belonging to it.

BANGLADESH is undoubtedly buffeted by many serious political problems. Lack of understanding between the government party and the main opposition party on the basic political orientation of the state is generating tension in the country. The rehabilitation of the anti-liberation forces under the protective umbrella of the government has aroused the ire of all those who stand for a secular, modern and progressive state. This conflict is finding an echo in different fields of our national life. These political differences are certainly most serious and substantive and the nation will have to find answers to these fundamental political questions in order to ensure its cohesion and unity. But must it also divide us on economic issues?

Despite differences in the political field, Bangladesh is at the threshold of a historic opportunity for forging a consensus on the key economic issues facing the nation. In my view, there never was a more opportune moment to build up national consensus on economic policies. I realise that skeptics will raise their eyebrows at this statement. Perhaps even optimists will pause and ponder. Given the current political mood in the country one is apt to take a dim view of the prospects for building up consensus. Yet the fact remains that the two main political parties today have no substantive difference in their views and outlook on economic issues. In fact, in terms of economic policies both of these parties can be characterized as 'centrist' parties. The fundamental change in the party platform of Bangladesh Awami League is the reason for the convergence of their views on the management of the country's economy.

Notwithstanding its emphasis on social and economic justice and traditional concern for people's welfare, the party has changed its orientation. It has embraced the market economic system. It has been a bold and realistic adjustment of its basic policy orientation. The party has once again demonstrated its ability to evolve and grow with the march of time. This dynamic

Why Can't We Have Consensus on Economic Issues?

change has removed any potential sources of conflict on the question of management of the economy between the BNP and the Awami League. The ruling party, as far as I am aware, has always supported the free market economy though it did not articulate its ideas on the subject in great detail. However, despite some of its archaic populist slogans its basic orientation was never in question. Thus we have a situation in which the two parties have no real reason not to work together in guiding and managing the economy.

The retreat of Marxism on the world scene has had its impact on Bangladesh politics as well. The leftist parties who used to compete with one another in revolutionary zeal have lost their moorings. Some of them are redefining their philosophy and others are busy forging new partnerships. In fact most of the leftists including the Communist party members will perhaps either join the Awami League or the BNP though a few may retain their independent identity and the name. However the demand for nationalization, which used to be heard in the past, is not likely to be a factor any more in our politics. There may be differences of opinion on details but there can be no two opinions that the free enterprise and private sector will be the driving force in the growth strategy. The innovative and creative power of the individual will be harnessed for accelerating the development process. Under these circumstances, is it not reasonable to expect that consensus can be developed on key economic questions?

What are the key economic questions? Economist can surely define these issues better than laymen but on the basis of my experience in different countries I can identify the following as some and I stress, only some of the vital issues on which there ought to be an attempt to forge national con-

sensus. First and foremost is the development of human resources. Nothing will work well as long as the vast majority of our people are illiterate. In fact economic growth and improvement in literacy rate seem to go hand in hand. Industrial development, modernization of agriculture, expansion and improvement of the infra-structure — all these goals will remain unattainable if we fail in the fight against ignorance and illiteracy. Labour productivity will remain low unless education and skill development begin to enjoy the highest priority.

Second, there must be consensus on the investment

Agriculture, for example, is given some protection everywhere. I do not see why Bangladesh should not look after the interests of the poor farmers while others are protecting theirs. Similarly, existing industrial units should be given a fair chance to stand up to foreign competition. A level playing field is essential to ensure that these industries will have a fighting chance to survive against foreign competition. In granting a degree of protection a balance has to be maintained in order to stimulate them to increase their efficiency and productivity.

Fourth, there must be industrial peace. This is possible only if all the important politi-

Fifth, there must be financial discipline in the country. Those defaulters who obtained loans on political connections — whatever be the party — must be dealt with firmness and consistency. Deviation from a policy on political grounds will surely defeat the policy itself. Some considerations will apply to the so-called sick industries. The government can deal with this complex question with a strong hand if there is broad-based political support for its policies.

Sixth, the question of corruption is a matter of national concern. The whole society has been infected by this virus. There must be a national compact to begin counter-action at some point. The government must lead the way. In another article I have said that as a starter, ministers should declare their assets that they had at the time of assuming office. This will ensure that no one will be able to accuse them when they leave office. Once this is done the process can be enlarged and extended to all the political forces so that the cleaning up can begin at the top. Fighting corruption, in my view, deserves high priority because if people can make money easily by corrupt means it demoralizes and discourages all those who seek their fortune by honest hard work.

Finally, the stability of the economic policy framework must be assured. Rules of the game cannot change in the middle of the game.

Unfortunately our experience in this regard is not very happy. How do we, for example, deal with the industries in the public sector which are losing money? I am not advocating any particular course of action but whatever policy is adopted it should enjoy a broad-based political support. Only then the government can implement the policy even if it is a tough one. The consensus

on these issues, formulated after a dialogue with the opposition and others concerned, must remain above and beyond the scope of the political problems facing the country.

We have been so used to a politics of conflict and confrontation in Bangladesh that it may seem somewhat naive to expect a bipartisan policy in dealing with economic issues while they confront each other on political questions. Given the tradition of our politics it is certainly not going to be easy. Bitterness generated in one field spreads like a virus to others. But are we really incapable of rising above petty party interests? Let us all look at ourselves honestly. We are one of the poorest nations on earth. The indignity and humiliation of our status as a LDC country should arouse our sense of self-respect and patriotism to do something about it. The government has so far made no attempt to open a dialogue with the opposition in order to build up a consensus. They have been too short sighted to grasp the opportunity created by the change of Awami League's economic policies. Instead, people have noted with regret that the government has been either making open attacks or insinuations against the opposition questioning their patriotism and honesty. In fact the government is often hinting at "conspiracies" that certain political quarters are hatching against national interests. The opposition is blamed for thwarting the development work in the country. The opposition in turn is constantly criticising the government for its alleged failures. This is the language of hostility and confrontation. People do not believe these vague and unsubstantiated accusation but these statements do foul up the environment and create discord and unrest within the society. Is it too late now for the government to turn back from the sterile and negative path that they have followed so far? Will the opposition respond positively to the opportunity? One cannot be certain but can we not, for the sake of the millions of our fellow citizens living in abject poverty, take up the challenge?

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

policy. Investors, both local and foreign, must be assured of the security of their investment. Of course, this is more easily said than done. For example, the law and order situation is a part of the overall sense of security for the investors. Investors cannot feel secure if they are subject to quiet extortion by hoodlums — often masquerading as followers of political parties. These thugs usually invoke the name of the ruling party though they have no true party affiliation. A liberal policy on foreign investment including joint ventures has to be an integral part of the investment policy. From my experience in East and South East Asia I can say that this is the most effective method for transfer of technology.

Third, there has to be a well thought out import policy which will take into account the legitimate interests of the local industries. Free trade should certainly be our goal but there are circumstances which call for policy modifications.

cal forces in the country are fully committed to this goal. We must learn from the experience of others. Of course, labour has a right to fair treatment. The right to collective bargaining must be upheld. However, each industry must find its own solutions. A nation-wide wage rate on the basis of a nation-wide confrontation between the labour unions and the employers can cause distortions in the wage structure. Besides, such a procedure disrupts the economy and gives the impression of labour unrest and confrontation. This is an issue on which a consensus will go a long way in reassuring the investors that the nation is ready to go into a growth mode. The policy of sterile confrontation must yield place to constructive dialogue between employers and employees. The government's proper role in this should be that of an objective umpire which will lay down the rules of the game and ensure all the parties observe the rules honestly and faithfully.

Ramos Relishes Split among Philippines Reds

Abby Tan writes from Manila

Communists in the Philippines are facing a serious leadership crisis. As they prepare for peace talks with the government to end Southeast Asia's only Marxist insurgency, questions are being raised whether a settlement is possible. Last September, President Ramos lifted a 35-year-old ban on communists to let them attend the talks. But divisions among the communists, now ideological orphans following the collapse of the Soviet Union, have strengthened the government's negotiating position.

THE Philippines government's offer to talk peace has revealed the potentially divisional discord within the communist movement. A fight among the leaders of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), just as they are preparing for peace talks with the government to end Southeast Asia's only Marxist insurgency, throws a question mark over whether a settlement is possible.

With the talks, scheduled for March, fast approaching, the government is watching with discreet satisfaction as the communists destroy themselves. The timing could not be better for the government. For the communists, however, it could be disastrous.

Even if no settlement is reached, or there is a partial agreement with a communist faction, President Fidel Ramos's government has the upper hand in negotiations.

Public squabbles among communists erupted last December when the party founder Jose Maria Sison accused three other leaders in Manila of conniving with the government to destroy the movement.

Fighting his war by fax machine from his exile in Utrecht, Netherlands, Sison sent messages to Manila newspapers condemning Romulo Kintanar, the former chief of the New Peoples Army (NPA), Ricardo Reyes, former party secretary-general and Benjamin De Vera, former head of the guerrilla forces in Mindanao, southern Philippines.

Sison charged them with grave errors in the bloody purges of the 1980s during which nearly 1,000 cadres were killed as suspected government spies. He alleges his opponents took part in anti-communist psychological warfare. Many went "overboard in serving the intelligence and pay-war scheme of the US-Ramos regime," he said.



Philippines peace progress. 1965 Marcos comes to power. 1969 New Peoples Army (NPA) founded, guerrilla war launched. 1972 Martial Law declared. 1973 Left umbrella group National Democratic Front set up. 1986 Marcos flees after popular uprising. 1986 Aquino releases NPA leaders, holds talks. 1988 Talks fail, NPA leader Romulo Kintanar arrested. 1992 Ramos lifts ban on communists, NPA ideological split. 1993 Talks set to resume in March.

sumed the CPP chairmanship, thereby harming his bid for political asylum in the Netherlands. The Dutch government has denied him asylum.

Ramos has declared the government will forge ahead with the peace process to settle the 23-year-old insurgency which, by official accounts, has killed 21,000 Filipinos. The government and the communists are laying the groundwork for peace talks. "We will continue with that process," Ramos told journalists, adding that the quarrel was an internal problem of the communists.

"First of all, it will not impair and neither derail our national unification efforts. The government will continue to reach out to them," he said. Last September, Ramos lifted a 35-year-old ban on communists to persuade them to come to the peace table.

The fight worries other communist leaders. Satur Ocampo, former spokesman of the communist umbrella group the National Democratic front, is trying to keep the lid down.

"News reports of a row between important personalities sadden me," he said. "I want to help in resolving this misunderstanding between comrades," said Ocampo, who was set free in October. He has asked Sison to stop issuing "damaging" statements and appealed to all sides to stop the war of words.

At the heart of the quarrel is a party rudderless in the post-Cold War era. Observers of the movement consider the Philippines insurgents ideolog-

ically orphaned with the collapse of communism in Europe.

Wracked by internal disension as the insurgency grew, and with many of its leaders exiled in Europe or arrested by government, the party has floundered in recent years over fundamental issues like strategy and tactics. It is unsure how to respond to government overtures for peace talks to end the fighting.

The CPP, born out of the whirlwind of China's Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, faced its own debates as Maoism de-

clined in China. CPP south a new direction as a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist party.

With the withdrawal of the US military bases from the Philippines last November, the communists have lost one more excuse for armed struggle.

But the key to the current struggle is Sison himself, a dogmatic ideologue labelled by his critics as the last Filipino Maoist. According to observers keeping close watch on the movement, Sison sought to reassert control over the party he had lost while he spent ten

years in jail.

A controversial plenum held last July south of Manila bore hallmarks of Sison's struggle. The plenum issued a policy document entitled "Reaffirm Our Basic Principle and Rectify Errors of the Past", written by Armande Livanag — believed to be Sison's pen name. The paper re-affirmed the Maoist strategy of encircling the cities from the countryside through a protracted people's war.

What the conflict boils down to is a struggle between the hardliners represented by Sison, and the moderates who want an alternative to armed struggle. The present course of self-destruction could result in a formal split, with the government negotiating a settlement with the moderates while hardliners continue armed struggle.

— GEMINI NEWS  
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OPINION

UN's Credibility in Question?

Tariq Wahidur Rahman writes from New York

A stunning internal report commissioned by the US State Department, which was published in the New York Times on 12 January, 1993, has vigorously undermined the credibility of the United Nations. In the aftermath of the cold war era where UN wants to play a major role, the finding of the State Department's report not only shook the faith in UN, it also has raised a significant question about its role as a neutral world organization. The report took us into the depths of the United Nations nature of conduct on a case-by-case basis. In some cases as in a country like Iraq it is very forceful and adamant in executing its will and in other cases, in a country like former Yugoslavia, when challenged by the Serbian forces it gives up its authority. This supports the accusation against the United Nations of being double standard and here the facts are. The report commissioned by the US State Department on Bosnia and Herzegovina has concluded that "the effort to send relief supplies to the Bosnians is largely a failure, with the Serbian forces skimming nearly one-quarter of all the aid brought in by air." According to the report, the UN officials in Bosnia and Herzegovina, under the threat from Serbian forces, not only surrendered a big portion of all the relief, they also surrendered the UN authority by letting the Serbs dictate their whole operation.

"Within Serb-controlled territories it is the Serb 'authorities', not the UN, who decide how and to whom relief will be distributed," the report

said. It further said, "Since the start of the humanitarian airlift, the UN has sought to appease the Serb militias by providing the Serb 'authorities' a portion (23 percent) of all relief commodities arriving by airlift, and by according them the right to inspect each cargo delivered by air or road, to approve or disapprove each cargo". Moreover, the report added, the United Nations has allowed the Serbs to "approve or disapprove the ethnicity of UNHCR convoy truck drivers, and to dictate the road convoy's route of entry to Sarajevo; in effect, the UN recognized the Serb militias as the de facto authority in the region." UNHCR stands for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, whose staff have been delivering aid to the besieged Muslims in Bosnia. The report was completed in December by Thomas O. Brennan, a relief expert who was hired by the office of Disaster Relief, a branch of the United States Agency for International Development. Mr Brennan spent four months in the former Yugoslavia. Mr Brennan's report also disclosed that the Serbs have used the authority given them by the UN to turn back several cargoes for Bosnia, including fire fighter's uniforms, warm and cold weather clothing flown in on German and American planes. In other activities, harassing the relief convoys by halting them day after day at Serbian check points have become their regular practice. Most of the times in these situations, the UN officials ran out of their food and patience and then turned back.

That explains why the UN mostly failed to deliver relief commodities into eastern Bosnia. These are the kinds of massive interdictions of aid that prompted Mr Brennan urging the west to retaliate immediately both to ensure the delivery of aid and to stop the killing of Bosnian Muslims.

Now the important question that arises here is why the UN is letting itself to be victimized in the hands of the Serbian forces, when UN forces in Bosnia are authorized to use force, if necessary? The mandate given to the United Nations forces in Bosnia by the Security Council last fall authorized the use of "all necessary means" to push relief supply through. "All necessary means" should mean that the UN will take whatever steps necessary, including armed intervention to fulfill its objective. Instead, what the UN does is begging to the Serbs, bribing them with a large portion of the relief aid in order to carry out its functions. Despite this bowing policy the UN officials are being humiliated every day at the hands of a group of thugs, criminals and killers.

So, when we see the UN executing its will taking various tougher actions against Iraq, on one hand, and on the other, under the threat from Serbs giving up its authority, even worse, letting the Serbs kill the Bosnian Deputy Prime Minister while he was under UN protection; letting Israel escape from all of its resolutions, gives us a strong reason to believe that the UN has lost its credibility as a neutral and genuine peace keeper.

To the Editor...

I accuse

Sir, On the Eid day there was an item on Togo in BTV news broadcast. Most of us, of course, do not know where that country lies, nor care whether dictators or democrats reign there. Too engrossed, aren't we, with our own cup of hemlock?

But I resent it when BTV tries to insult me. Concomitant with the news was displayed a map — stretching from Mozambique to Angola — missing Togo by a few hundred miles. Now, was this a fair treatment to BTV viewers? Weren't they being disrespectful to my rudimentary sense of geography? And how about their basic honesty in presenting news? Who is at fault — the pro-

ducer, the news reader or the BTV authorities (whatever that means)? Will it be too much to demand an explanatory apology? Will a public institute (which the BTV is) get away with impunity, displaying such lack of responsibility and showering undeserved insult on the tax payer on the side?

Welayet D Ahmed  
Kakral, Dhaka

Service to people

Sir, We appreciate the Home Ministry's concern to adopt protective measures against any possible terrorist attack inside the Secretariat premises. The security measures have been further tightened from March 27, 1993. Strict restrictions have been

imposed on the entry of visitors into the Secretariat.

Meanwhile, it is expected that the Cabinet and Establishment Divisions will issue directives to all the Ministries urging officials for early disposal of files and for maintaining punctuality so that members of the public and other outside officials may not suffer for delay in the movement of files from section to section and ministry to ministry. And a service and system for answering to public enquiries regarding their files should be introduced in the greater interest of serving the people by the democratic government.

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