

Chance for Afforestation

Much as the environment may have become the issue of the 90's, little so far has been done to restore the physical order of the country. However, the story that appeared on the business page of this paper yesterday looks quite encouraging. The programme basically is nothing new, it is the approach that makes it different. Proshika, a leading non-governmental organisation (NGO) has done an admirable job of ensuring participation of the growers at the grass-roots level. Indeed agro-forestry and social forestry are the catch-words for environmentalists today. But as their name suggest, they remain but a programme on paper if the participation of the local people cannot be ensured. Most of the tree plantation campaigns in the country failed in the past because the post-plantation care, so necessary for the success of the drives, was next to nil. Proshika was the first organisation to identify the problems and got into business to tide over the problem. It carried out its first few programmes on a trial basis with startling results and only then did it decide to expand the programme to wider areas. 'Wood-lot' Programme, developed recently, is one in which the concept of full participation and sharing of the benefits is really at work.

Proshika's part in the whole exercise is rather supervisory. What it does at times is to play the role of a bargaining agent between the beneficiaries and the local authorities. In fact, it advocates the cause of the poor organised groups and help mediate the contract of the land leased and the benefits to be shared. But it does more in that it supplies the plants free of cost and, more importantly, help develop the mechanism by which the entire programme is kept under constant surveillance by the growers themselves. The model has proved highly effective because of the incentives provided for in the process. Social forestry follows the same patterns and principles, ensuring for the farmers a reasonable share.

The idea has, to a small extent, been incorporated by the latest government tree plantation drive. Hopefully, this will ensure, albeit marginally, some post-plantation care and vigil and account for the survival of more trees this time than ever before.

What was needed was an organised effort to be backed up by a well-drawn plan for the whole country. The saplings distributed surely could make the country greener, if not replenish the lost forest resources. In the context of the scientists sounding the warning that Bangladesh is on the brink of environmental disaster, this was however, one of our pressing priorities. If the homework were done properly before, distributing the saplings, their survival rate would have been much higher. This was essential because it was the only nation-wide programme. The model Proshika has presented could be adopted in toto, if for nothing else, but for the sake of economic benefits the poor were expected to derive at no extra cost on anybody's part.

Eventually, however, such mutually satisfying programmes have to be taken.

After all, the agro-forestry is not going to be highly attractive for the farmers simply because of the acute scarcity of land. The combined cultivation of crops and trees on small plots will hardly be a lucrative idea. Only in areas where no other crops other than trees have much of a prospect, the proposal sounds okay. Proshika has already proved the point, let others — including the government — follow the example.

Clinton Gets Ready to Take Gamble over Ireland

Kevin J Kelley writes from Washington

President Bill Clinton appears poised to make a major departure in United States foreign policy by appointing a special envoy to help broker a peace agreement in Northern Ireland. A proposal for direct US diplomatic involvement in Northern Ireland was first offered ten years ago. The idea originated among Irish-Americans sympathetic to the Roman Catholic minority in the British-controlled Protestant-Majority province.

Proponents of the plan assumed that a US negotiating role in Northern Ireland would increase the chances of a settlement of the 25-year-long armed conflict. These Irish-Americans further calculated that any settlement would have to include changes in the political status quo, under which the Protestants are able to maintain Northern Ireland's link to London, while the Catholics are unable to achieve their goal of uniting the territory with the Irish Republic.

The special-envoy notion was strongly resisted a first by both the British and Irish governments as well as by the Republican White House and leading Irish-Americans on Capitol Hill. A shift occurred in the mid-1980s, however, when Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a New York Democrat, introduced a Senate resolution urging the Reagan administration to appoint such an intermediary.

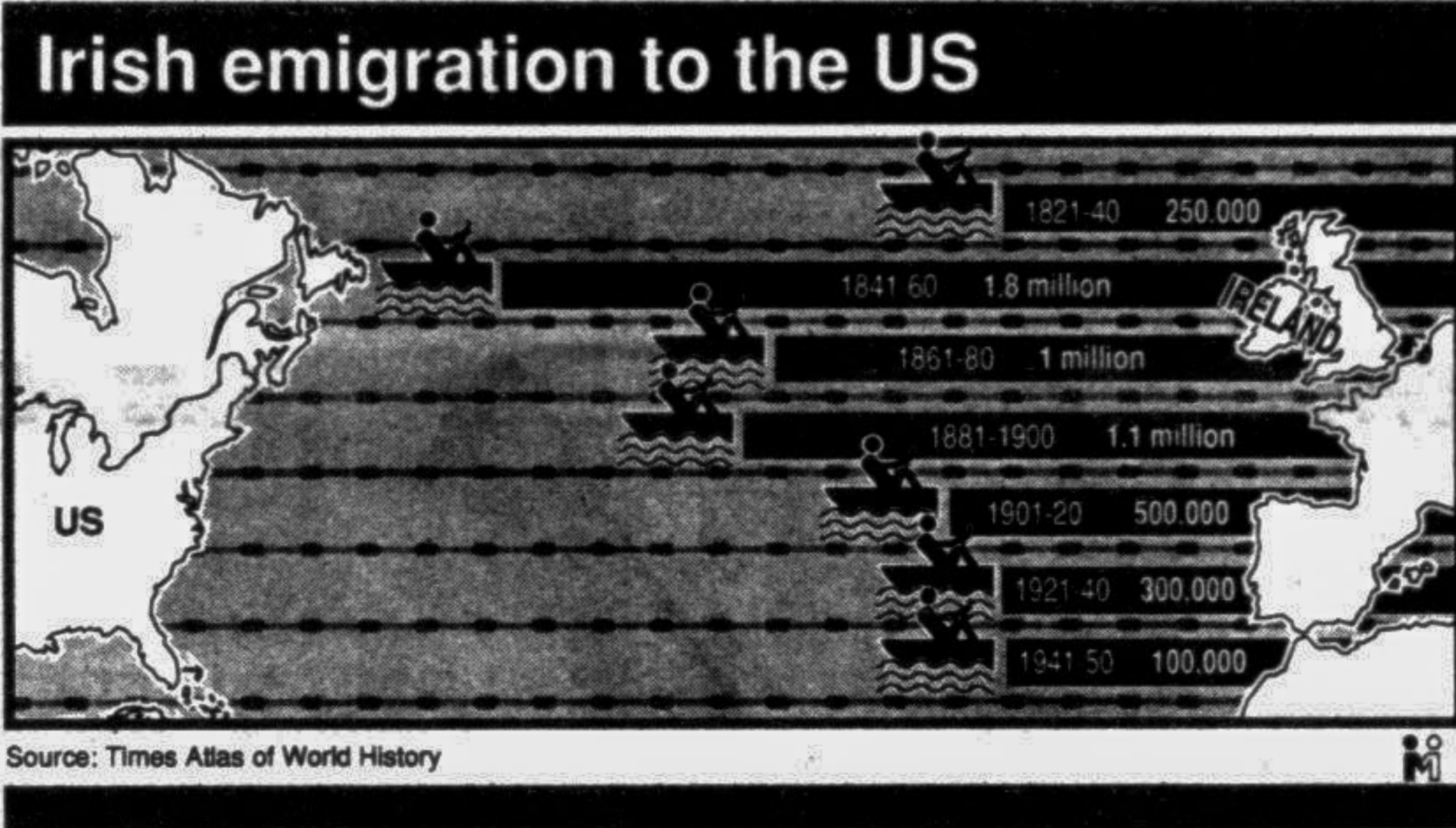
Moynihan's proposal was supported by other prominent Irish-American politicians, including Senator Edward Kennedy. Their new approach in turn signalled a change in outlook on the part of the Dublin government, since US lawmakers of Irish descent usually consult closely with the Irish embassy in Washington on policy initiatives affecting Ireland.

Irish officials and their US congressional allies were coming to realise the growing political power and independence of Irish-American activists concerned about Northern Ireland. It was this same recognition that led Clinton to pledge during the 1992 presidential campaign that he would name a special envoy.

Grassroots lobbying groups like the Irish National Caucus, founded in 1974 by Rev. Sean McManus, had begun in the early 1980s to exert influence over local politicians in states with significant numbers of Irish-American residents.

By mobilising this constituency McManus's Caucus and other organisations achieved success in their campaign on behalf of what known as the MacBride Principles. This set of anti-discrimination criteria is intended to curb the religious prejudice that has long consigned Northern Irish Catholics to economic and social inferiority.

As proof of Irish-American political strength, a total of 13 states and 40 cities have now affirmed the MacBride Principles. Each of these gov-



ernments is prohibited by law from doing business with any US company operating in Northern Ireland that does not agree to respect the MacBride formula.

A similar degree of pressure has been applied by the same groups in regard to the issue of a US special envoy. As a candidate, Clinton saw that he might gain an important share of votes by embracing a cause popular among some Irish-Americans who had previously voted for Reagan and Bush.

He has surprised many observers by making the fulfilment of his special-envoy

pledge one of the first foreign policy initiatives of his administration.

McManus believes that the 46-year-old President has a different view of US-British relations from that of Reagan and Bush. He says: "Clinton is of a generation that doesn't share the sentimental, World War Two attachment of England. He still thinks there's a 'special relationship' between Washington and London, but he differs from other presidents in seeing that as a reason why the US should in fact be playing a role in Northern Ireland."

By signalling his determination to appoint a special envoy, Clinton has persuaded the British government to drop its resistance to the idea. Following his first meeting with the new President, Conservative Prime Minister John Major said Britain would have no objection to this initiative.

British officials have sought to downplay the significance of the move, contending that the envoy would be charged with only 'fact-finding' responsibilities. It has also been suggested in the same quarters that this emissary be instructed not to talk with representatives of the Irish Republican Army.

Britain itself has refused to include IRA supporters in the several rounds of talks among Northern Irish parties that London has sponsored in recent years.

In the country are bewitched by invocations the intent of which is to drag the nation into the dark recesses of pre-history; that major cities, including the country's industrial and commercial capital, Bombay, are threatened by ugly communal strife; and that the country's ruling party is producing fresh evidence of organisational and ideological confusion which is rendering it increasingly incapable of coping with the situation.

These facts about India are being beamed everyday by the satellite channels. They are, not surprisingly, having a negative effect on investors' confidence about India; the country's general credit rating has sunk to an extremely low level. The finance minister's tongue-in-cheek statement will not alter the circumstances. India, the leaders of her government should have the humility to realise, is no China. The Chinese have succeeded in building their economy, on their own, and their leaders are in full control of the nation's political processes; India, in contrast, has a wobbly political structure and cannot survive without substantial foreign hand-outs. Both countries have travelled a long distance over the past few decades, but they have moved in contrary directions.

The writer, one of the best-known newspaper columnists of India, whose weekly commentary, "Cutting Corner" appears in several papers in his country, is a former Finance Minister of West Bengal. The above article, syndicated by Mandra Publications, New Delhi has been made available to us for exclusive use in Bangladesh. We expect to use the column by Mr Mitra from time to time.

not excessively bothered by the outburst of student restlessness. There was, for a brief few months, a slowdown in visits by experts from abroad and perhaps a marginal drop in tourism; but as the economy continued to surge forward and political tranquillity got fully restored, the foreign exports soon returned in strength, and so did the foreign tourists. It also needs to be added that since China is still not an 'open' country in the sense India is, it is relatively easy to regulate the flow of information about domestic happenings to the outside world.

India used to take pride as the world's largest, and most open democracy. Globalisation of communications has rendered the country even more open; the tribulations the nation is going through since the Ayodhya incident are now being laid bare by the device of satellite communications minutely, hour after hour, and day after day, to a global audience. The rest of the world is learning that the world's largest democracy harbours within its fold powerful authoritarian forces who swear by bigotry and religious fundamentalism; that many millions

Consumer Rights Movement

An Australian woman is planning to sue the country's state-owned Qantas Airways. The reason? In spite of her asking for a non-smoking seat she was forced to sit in the smoking area during a nine hour Sydney-Bangkok flight. This resulted in her becoming sick, which in turn ruined her holidays in the 'Land of Smiles'. The airlines has already given her a voucher to make a second trip. But it is the time she lost, and the suffering she had to undergo because Qantas could not give her the desired seat, are what remains to be compensated for.

The question is how far does the right of a airline passenger go? Quite far, we think. When one buys a plane ticket, it is not only for the ride, but also for a safe and congenial ride, one which will not force someone to be exposed to a health hazard. We hope the Australian judges find in favour of the passenger, so that the right signal is sent to all the airlines.

The incident brings out clearly how far the concept of consumers' rights have advanced in some parts of the world. In Bangladesh the consumers are at the mercy of what is being dished out. Consumer protection laws are either vague or are unknown due to its unuse. Take the most dramatic example. Recently some 350 babies have died due to badly prepared, or substandard paracetamol syrup. Yet we know of not a single case of parents suing any of the pharmaceutical companies. Forget about the subtle or indirect violation of consumer's rights. When we do not take legal action against such vicious and deadly violation as illustrated by the paracetamol incidence, then there must be something seriously wrong about our notions of rights and wrongs. The reluctance of people to take legal action is, to some extent, due to the cumbersome nature of our legal process, which many try to avoid.

We feel that the paracetamol incidence has brought out the need for a conscious and powerful consumer movement. There are a few bodies that do such work. But they need to be organised better, and given more support in the form of a movement. Such a movement will put on alert the substandard producers and manufacturers and reward those who adhere to quality control.

We eagerly wait for the day when we will be able to sue a bus owner for polluting our roads with deadly exhaust putting at risk the lives of thousands of rickshaw passengers and pedestrians. For the moment, however, we should seriously look into ways of bringing to the fore laws that protect consumers and think about how we could build a healthy consumer rights movement.

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.

The burnt-out cases

Sir, S Korea and Taiwan remind us of the title of a famous novel 'The Burnt Out Case'. Let us only hope the next name will not be Thailand. What is suspected to have happened was that these two countries were cleverly encouraged and offered incentives to export more and more to feed the vast US market. The take-off and artificially sustained growth rates were designed to be faster than the infrastructure could sustain for long; with the result their economies burnt out within a decade. A 200m sprinter cannot be groomed to be a marathon champion.

Now, despite the disparities in GATT, the industrialized nations (mostly the West against the Third World) are employing subtle new tactics on the developing countries and imposing unreasonable terms and pre-conditions, and interfering in the national planning policies as pre-requisites for the sanction of foreign aid. The creation of new blocks

ETG bills

Sir, Electricity, Telephone and Gas authorities are giving advertisements and warnings of disconnection to the consumers/subscribers for paying bills regularly but, unfortunately, the system of payment of bills is becoming complicated day by day. Earlier, Telephone bill could be paid at the nearest branch of Janata Bank or Agrani Bank. Now, for the whole South zone of Dhaka, one has to pay a Telephone bill only at Janata Bank, Dhaka College branch.

It is to mention here that Electric bills (both domestic and commercial) for a large area of Dhaka, Municipal and Gas bills from any locality of Dhaka are also accepted here. For all these, four kinds of bill scroll number is given from one counter only. So, there is a long queue for which it takes at least three hours to reach the counter. Only one person at this counter puts the scroll

Islamic laws

Sir, This refers to Mr Mohammed Mohiuddin's write-up which appeared in 'The Daily Star' of the 19th March. Mr Mohiuddin writes — "Religion

Mock mission

Sir, The recent air dropping of food relief by the US over Bosnia in order to allevi-

M Zahidul Haque Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka

Zafar Shaheen Elephant Road, Dhaka

Mohammed Mohiuddin's write-up which appeared in 'The Daily Star' of the 19th March. Mr Mohiuddin writes — "Religion

ate the plight of besieged Bosnian Muslims seems to have yielded no real sign of relief to the hungry mass so far. Rather, in desperate attempt to collect food, many innocent Bosnians have become easy prey to the pounding artillery guns of marauding Serbs. The unhindered crime perpetrated by the Serbs on Bosnian Muslims has evoked lot of table talks at the UNO but virtually without resulting in any positive step to halt the atrocities.

During the Gulf War, we witnessed the allied forces detecting and destroying Scud missile batteries in Iraq with pinpoint accuracy aided by satellites.

So why then is it not possible now for US in same manner to locate the Serbs' artillery positions and silence the firepower which is wreaking havoc on the helpless Muslim population in Bosnia.

In my opinion, dropping of bombs first on Serbs artillery sites before airdropping food relief over Bosnia could at least have helped Bosnian Muslims to escape the wrath of Serbs' brutality. At present the air dropping of food mission could be seen as a sheer mockery, where one is trying to fill a bucket with a hole without plugging the hole first.