

Rebukes from AI

To start with the positive side of the report of the Amnesty International (AI) on Bangladesh, released yesterday, it is good to know that the authorities here have made a commitment that various cases (of torture and death in custody) cited by the London-based organisation will be investigated and necessary preventive and corrective actions are expected to follow.

While we welcome the spirit of co-operation displayed by the administration towards AI, when a general tendency in many countries is to dismiss any accusation of violation of human rights, we must take serious note of various charges, made against the authorities here by AI. They are very serious indeed, ranging from detention without trial (obviously under the Special Powers Act) to several reports of possible extrajudicial executions, including "politically-motivated killings".

There are other areas where the administration's commitment to human rights — and indeed, to the Rule of Law — should be tested under the highest possible standards. Here, we deplore the continued existence of the Special Powers Act (SPA).

Let the People Judge Ekatturer Jishu

The nation's leading writers and intellectuals have for the last few days been denouncing the Film Censor Board's refusal to release Ekatturer Jishu for screening. We feel that the censors have been wrong on point of principle and grossly so. Over the years the worst that has been done to our culture causing a dangerous warping of the national psyche has all come through the courtesy of the Bangladesh Film Censor Board.

The very idea that a small group of handpicked people should preside over what the people of an independent polity should and shouldn't see and hear, is nauseating. And, as John Milton had argued, no person of taste and discrimination would ever consent to be a censor.

The Bangladeshi censors are of course, a completely different story, far more diabolical in their grasp of responsibility and its discharge. No, morals and taste and culture are not their lookout. Stinkingly vulgar exhibitionism cannot affect them, ugly and damned foul visual construction of kindly silly concoctions of the eternal 'chase' formula do not disturb them.

This is a film by a freedom-fighter who had been up to his neck into the thing. And on celluloid he quests for a clinching truth that can sublimate whole bloody saga of suffering. The Censor Board would be well-advised to release the film for national screening without exposing them, indeed the government itself, to grave dangers of being suspected on the most important issue of the Liberation War.

SAARC Minority Rights Commission Need of the Hour

by Iqbal A Ansari

The problems of constitutional-legal disabilities of minorities in each state, and factors causing their marginalisation alienation and powerlessness in general and specific issues that are likely to cause increasing conflict in each country and the region can be studied in a more rational humanist perspective by a supranational independent body....

The theory of sovereign domestic jurisdiction of the state on minorities within its borders

— Legitimation of concern for coreligionists left behind as minorities in the neighbouring countries after partition;

— Viewing the minority problem in the context of interstate adversarial relationship and using the ill-treatment of minorities in the other country to embarrass, even harass, it in international forums and meetings;

— Clamouring for intervention of UN and other international bodies.

— Treating the minority in each country as a hostage against a fair deal for one's coreligionists in the other country, relying on the assumption of balance of terror.

The first three assumptions have generally guided policies and actions of South Asian States, whereas the fourth is the worst case scenario but not hypothetical. It has been and is being tacitly assumed or advocated by chauvinist groups in each country.

While conceding the sovereign jurisdiction of the member states over their minorities, concern of the peoples and the governments in the region about each other's minorities cannot be dismissed as wholly illegitimate on the following grounds:

Human rights and minority rights being a worldwide concern, nation states cannot seek protection under the umbrella of non-interference, thereby shutting out all means of dialogue and discussion on the fate of the minorities. This universal concern for minority rights has now taken the shape of UN Declaration on minorities in December 1992.

The inter-group cultural-religious pattern obtaining in most SAARC states singly and in the region as a whole is so complex and their demographic distribution so varied, that each country cannot singly tackle the problem on its own.

Historical and contemporary realities of the South Asian situation are such that people in one country cannot remain unconcerned with the fate of those in the neighbouring countries with whom they have had long and deep historical ties.

Some of the minority groups in one country, for example, have blood relations in the other country, with whom their contact is still not lost.

The feelings of anxiety about real and imagined ill treatment of 'cousins' across the border nurtured during normal times, get unleashed during crisis situations disrupting domestic inter-group peace and contributing to interstate war psychosis.

Men of reason and goodwill in the countries of the region inspired by humanism and even those pragmatists who would not like drift of events to overtake them so as to continue to cause misery to minorities in each country and threaten peace across borders, should, therefore, realise that it is imperative to replace primordialism and antediluvian views of domestic jurisdiction by supranational regional instruments and institutions for protection and promotion of minority rights separately in each country and jointly in the region. Such regional instruments do exist in Europe, America and Africa. The European Community can specially provide a good model for the South Asian region.

The only interstate instrument on minorities that was adopted in the wake of partition is the Nehru-Liaquat Agreement of April 1950, which is almost a dead letter now. The agreement, apart from affirming the principle of ensuring complete equality of rights to minorities in the then two states, bore the imprints of the specific problems that arose in the wake of partition, especially in the north-eastern region. Its revival has been lately discussed in some sections of Pakistan. It is well that the Agreement is dead. It is not worthy of revival for two reasons: first because it will tend to perpetually make minorities look up to the Govt. across the border as its saviour; secondly being interstate agreement, its functioning will always be subjected to the vagaries of the inter-governmental political weather. Moreover, nation-states being never guided by altruism, can easily ditch their 'Clients' in the pursuit of their own national interest.

The best course will be to constitute a SAARC Minority Rights Commission under regional South Asian instruments on Human Rights to be adopted by the SAARC and ratified by each member state. This supranational regional body with adequate representation of each Govt., the minorities and NGOs, will be vested with powers to monitor, investigate, study and report on the state of minorities and suggest measures for ensuring realisation of equal rights by minorities of all countries in the light of UN instruments on minority rights.

As each SAARC member state has ratified most of the relevant UN instruments, and has indicated acceptance of the December 1992 UN Declaration on minorities as charter of the SAARC's preamble provides desire of promoting peace, stability, amity and

progress in the region as one of the bases for establishing the Association, it should not post any insurmountable problem to constitute this Minorities Commission. The very first objective of the SAARC Charter envisages promotion of the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and improvement in their quality of life. It is well that the Dhaka Declaration of 1985 that accompanied the Charter recognised that peace and security was an essential pre-requisite for the realisation of this objective. Steps, therefore, need to be taken to evolve the required regional instruments and to establish the Commission to ensure peace and stability.

The problems of constitutional-legal disabilities of minorities in each state, and factors causing varying degrees of their marginalisation-alienation and powerlessness in general and specific problems like those of the Bihari Muslims, the Chakma Buddhists, places of worship, the migrants, the stranded and refugees and other similar issues that are likely to cause increasing conflict in each country and the region can be studied in a more rational humanist perspective by such a supranational independent body than can be expected from Govts. and politicians in each country. Such a measure will not only be reassuring to minorities but also help in promoting mutual trust and confidence between countries and their majorities, so badly needed in the region.

The author is a Professor of English at Aligarh Muslim University, and is a member of Minorities Council of India. He sent us this article by mail.

"Elimination of Poverty must Take Centre Stage in World Affairs"

by Prof Muhammad Yunus

It is a long way from the huts of the poor in Bangladesh to the court of the King of Belgium. The chances of anybody from those huts ever covering this distance is as remote as those of travelling from earth to the furthest star. But, His Majesty, has let us cross this distance. Thanks for making this happen. Thanks for recognising us for the work we do, and the dream we hold in our hearts. We are delighted to be recognised because through this it has been signalled to the world that His Majesty too shares our dreams.

At the close of the twentieth century, technology and information breakthroughs are taking mankind to ever new frontiers of possibilities at every passing moment. But unless we decide very quickly where we want to go, we may regret having missed certain opportunities or having gone the wrong way altogether.

To me it is quite a mystery why more than a billion people around the world continue to live a life of hunger, malnutrition, disease, and hopelessness; why their number keeps on increasing, instead of declining very fast. It remains an even bigger mystery why during an age when we are learn-

ing to pay attention to the state of the environment we remain indifferent to the state of the living conditions for a vast multitude of human beings. Why is it that when we are confronted with the issue of poverty and hunger, we cannot think of any better solution than giving handouts and relief. Could it be that our knowledge is expanding with an unprecedented speed in some areas while at the same time remaining paralysed in others, such as, in designing new concepts and institutions to cope with human issues like alleviation of poverty, and hunger and ensuring human dignity for all members of the human race.

The prime responsibility of the human civilization should be ensuring human dignity for each and every member of society. But looking at the condition of the poor around the world we cannot say that we have accepted this responsibility with any seriousness.

Even on the ground of human rights we have failed in carrying out our responsibilities. The poor are denied all human rights, not just one. We don't seem to be too worried about it.

Instead, we use the best part of our ingenuity and our

most valuable resources in preparing our nations to kill and destroy each other in the name of peace for the victors.

The twentieth century is coming to a close with the exciting news of the end of the cold war era. This gives us an excellent opportunity to make it the last century when poverty and hunger existed in human history, but only if we decide to turn our talents to this task. We must convince the world to make this commitment and get into serious action.

First we must recognize that poverty is neither created nor sustained by the poor. The roots of poverty can be found in our institutions, concepts and theoretical frameworks.

Grameen Bank questioned the basic principle of one such institution — the institution of banking. Financial institutions are based on the axiom that banking can only be done on the basis of collateral. This one principle immediately rejects a very large segment of world population from access to credit, and thus prevents them from taking control of their own fate. In Grameen, we consider

collateral as a wall which denies a large mass of able, willing, and hard working poor people the opportunity to work out of poverty. Grameen Bank has demonstrated that banking can be done without collateral, with the poorest of the poor, and in a cost-effective way. Starting as a tiny one-man project in 1976, today we serve 1.5 million borrowers in 32,000 villages in Bangladesh. Ninety-three per cent of our borrowers are women. Grameen lends out over twenty million US dollars worth of Bangladesh currency each month. Grameen's recovery rate is 97 per cent.

Grameen has demonstrated that offering credit to the poor is a better strategy than offering them handouts. Development of infra-structural facilities in the name of long-term economic growth does not help the poor much when they have to survive only by selling their labour. Benefits to the poor women through such actions may even be negative. Availability of credit frees poor women and men to make use of their talents in businesses and other productive activities to change their economic situation. During the past seventeen years Grameen's poor borrowers have demonstrated every critical analysis that they indeed are creditworthy. Now the real question is whether the conventional banks are people-worthy. The poor have shown that they can move out of poverty if the policies and institutions cease to be biased against them. Alleviation of poverty is more a question of removing barriers than offering special favour to the poor. Recognising credit as a basic human right will remove one formidable barrier.

Recognizing credit as a human right is not, after all, that far-fetched. In just the past few years the international community has given unprecedented urgency to reversing environmental degradation, establishing democracy and stabilizing population growth. In our experience, the only way to sustainably address these three issues is to first tackle poverty. Indeed, if we look for places in the world where the environment or democracy are threatened, or where overpopulation is rampant, my guess is that we shall find poverty in the same proportion. Moreover, if we look

at places where these other issues are being resolved, poverty will also be found to be on the decline. If the environment, democracy and population can take centre stage in world affairs, it is only sensible that poverty join them there. And establishing credit as a human right will allow for effectively addressing poverty, and the many intractable problems it causes.

By awarding us the prestigious King Baudouin Development Prize 1992, His Majesty and his Foundation have given a rare honour to our institution and enormous credibility to our cause. On behalf of Grameen's 1.5 million borrower-members, we, Ms Manzeera Khatun, Ms Nurjahan Begum and myself, accept this great honour with all humility.

Let this great occasion help the world accept the fact that the elimination of poverty is a doable proposition, and let this occasion be an expression of our resolve to remove hunger and poverty from the surface of the earth.

Extracted from the author's acceptance speech of King Baudouin Development Prize, 1992, which was delivered in Brussels on 22 April '93.

"Share Economy": A New Concept toward Economic Emancipation

by Vincent G. Jaydeo

MARTIN Weitzman, a Professor of economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA, who authored a book titled "Share Economy" has received international ovation for his proposal (Share Economy) as the best economic idea since the theories of Keynes. Professor Weitzman's new theory argues, that inflation and unemployment both can be stabilized by "making workers' pay more flexible".

In his explanation of his new idea, Weitzman justifies that instead of dealing with our major macroeconomic problems — unemployment and inflation — exclusively by sledgehammer like manipulation of money supply, tax rates, the size of the budget, etc, we should attack the problems at the source by making workers' pay more flexible. He further defends his theory by saying that this could be made possible by keeping the workers' pay as it is but a substantial part of the pay be linked directly to profitability per employee. He advocates for workers' pay to be divided into two parts — one, a base pay; the other, a part that would depend upon the fortunes of the

company. This would be an incentive to employer who wants to expand production during good times and to resist layoffs during bad times. He tries to elaborate further, that in the current wage system, the company wants to hire workers up to the point where what the worker is contributing is at least equal to the amount that the worker is being paid. In case of profit sharing, the revenue income is effectively divided into two parts: one fixed fraction is going to labour, the other fixed fraction is retained

by the management for paying off capital, stockholders and the rest. According to this theory, the fractional division will be in managements' interest to make the fraction as big as possible. He further quantifies, that under the present wage system a limit is set as to how many workers the employer wants to recruit and how big he wants the fractions to be.

When some portion of the fraction is being paid to labour — no matter how many workers there are — the employer retains the other fraction. The employers naturally want to make the portion as big as possible. In the even of recession, Weitzman contends, that workers' pay remaining within profit sharing base line, the recessionary shocks would not contact employment but maintain employment level. Now, if we take into account the present global economic situations, we would come to the conclusion that there are hardly any country which could deny the fact that the inflationary situations and unemployment are not its biggest hurdles in developing its economic conditions. Although Weitzman's theory directs his ideas to private industries, but there are no reason why this could not be applied in the public industries. Because, in most of the developed and underdeveloped countries, public industries and enterprises are facing these serious economic problems. More so, situations arising out of these problems are more acute and maligned in the developing countries, where most of the production owned and where a large section of the employees are concentrating in these industries.

In the present times, most of the developing countries are exerting their full mights to raise the production of their country in order to control inflationary situations and unemployment problems. However, the statistics reveal that in most of these countries production is not rising in proportion to the rising of the rapid unemployment and inflation. The idea which Professor Weitzman propounds, does not necessarily be of use to the developed country only, rather it has its utility in the developing

countries as well, where the situations are more grave and pathetic than what is prevailing in the developed country. The profit sharing system as proposed does have some basis as far as the raising of production is concerned. In developing countries, where labour surplus is predominant, this theory would work as an incentive to the workers and as well as to the employer. The present wage system, as is being described by Professor Weitzman, does not provide any incentive to workers which would encourage more production. Furthermore, in the present wage system, during recession, production is curtailed, workers are laid off and the price level is maintained. With Professor Weitzman's system of "Share Economy" workers take a pay cut as revenue fraction becomes smaller, cost are reduced, but nobody is laid off, production levels are maintained and prices are adjusted to revive sales. This would ultimately stabilize the inflation but unemployment remains unpredictable. If profit sharing system is introduced, this would check all the adverse growth rates, which the country seems to encounter in its everyday administrative planning.

However, this would require a thorough evaluation and investigation of the "Share Economy" theory which Professor Weitzman attempted to argue and defend. As far as the present inflationary trend and the unemployment crisis are prevailing in the country, it is high time that our economic planners and business communities came out with something concrete in the light of the concept developed by Professor Weitzman and thus save the country from the verge of economic collapse.

To the Editor...

Use of colour in food items

Sir, Of late it is observed that hotels/restaurants are using colour in their food items, perhaps more than before, to make them attractive to the customers. Not only in hotels in the houses too we use colour while preparing special food items on festive occasions. Food industries too are using colour in preparing provisions and soft drinks. The chemical ingredients there in the food colour are often criticised as are injurious to health. Moreover the colours that are being sold in ordinary open bazaar for use in food items do not appear to have been tested. I therefore request the knowledgeable persons to educate the people about the use of colour in food items.

There should be wide publicity regarding safe use of colour in food items. The concerned government department should also examine the

genuineness of food colours being sold in the market and ensure safety of general consumers.

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury Sonali Bank, HO, Dhaka

TA rules

Sir, As per existing Rules, officers in the scale of Tk. 6300 and above can travel by airconditioned class and other Class I officers by 1st class of the Railway. But there are airconditioned and first class berths in a number of trains, fares of which are higher than normal airconditioned and first class. In the absence of clear instruction authorising officers to travel by such berths, some audit offices are refusing to pass TA bills for these.

The first category of officers mentioned above are entitled to travel even by air. Hence there is no reason why they should not be allowed to travel by airconditioned berth.

I therefore urge the Ministry of Finance to issue

necessary amendment/clarification to the travelling allowance rules so that audit offices may not become unnecessarily fussy in passing the TA bills.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury Dhaka Cantt, Dhaka

The Middle East

Sir, Thanks to The Daily Star for the news item "Arabs want peace as soon as possible" (8-4-93) on Hosni Mubarak and Bill Clinton's White House meet. The rôle of Israel after grabbing a substantial portion of the Middle East territory has been so much fold that it even tends to flout those mighty powers at whose well wishes it was born 44 years ago. It is a tragedy that the Palestinians are refugees in their own land.

The Muslims of Middle East must realise that it is their folly that has brought endless miseries to the people of the ME countries. Had they been wise enough to remain united, they would not have been subjected to so much suffering

and humiliation. Suddenly I remember Pakistan's founder and first Governor General saying, "the weak and the defenceless invite aggression from others" and he urged his follow-men to be united and strong enough so that enemies did not dare entertain any aggression design.

Since the cessation of hostilities of the Gulf War, the world people have abundant occasions to see the futile and abortive steps taken by the UNO and some nations which give enough impression that they have no sincere will to resolve the Palestine and other aching issues. It is perhaps necessary for the Muslim nations to change the strategy and withdraw from participating at the time killing processes and try to unite the Muslim powers of the Middle East even on a minimum issue so that 'enemies' may mend their ways to provide a workable solution.

Hussain Ibne Ahmed Rassey, Dhaka