

A Plea to the Labour

The conventional message on the historic May Day which is being observed throughout the world today focuses on the need for a fair deal for workers, in wages as well as in living conditions. In recent years, most developing nations have also been concerned about increase in the employment of women, minorities and disadvantaged ethnic groups. In short, a country like Bangladesh cannot close its eyes to the need for improving conditions of its workers, to the dismal disparities which cut across this impoverished nation.

There is hardly a need for us to make any significant departure from this message. In fact, there is even an urgent need for the administration to reinforce it through identification of areas where major improvements are both possible and imperative. Here, the first priority must indeed be in the field of literacy for both adult and child labour, followed by the spread of knowledge of family planning, better sanitation facilities and basic health care programmes.

However, at this moment, it has also become immensely important for the labour in Bangladesh to look at the scenario, at its own needs and responsibilities, from an overall national perspective. Over the years, a cross section of people in the country, including those who are instinctively sympathetic to the labour, have come to the conclusion that workers unions here, by and large, are unconcerned about the overall economic progress in the country, about peace and stability on the industrial front and even about raising the output of their members. It is felt that interested as they are in their immediate salary demands, and other issues, their attitude towards linking possible wage increases to productivity is one of indifference, with the result that they remain apparently oblivious to what a work stoppage for a single day costs the country or a particular industrial plant.

Obviously, the fault does not lie exclusively with the labour. It lies with the weakening, if not the breakdown, of a government-labour relations and, perhaps to a lesser degree, with the elusive cooperation between employers and employees in individual ventures. In this context, a sudden demand for a halt by a group of workers takes the authorities by surprise, especially because their early warning system tends to be either inefficient or politically partisan. More often than not, authorities partially accept the demands, sometimes laying down mandatory increases for the private sector, thus curbing the freedom of individual investors to operate as they think best. Herein lies one of the major threats facing entrepreneurs, both foreign and local, who have a genuine interest in the economic progress of this country.

Answers to these problems are clear. They have produced the right results in countries, like Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, where industrial peace has become a decisive factor in their relentless economic thrust. We need a series of tripartite meetings among the Labour Ministry, the employers and the workers on the state of our economy and, indeed, on individual sectors, demonstrating a high degree of openness on the part of the government and owners of industries, in both public and private sectors. Once some trust has been restored in the minds of workers, their unions may well realise how essential it is to create conditions in the country for higher level of investment, especially from foreign sources, without which the economy cannot progress, and we cannot produce more jobs for the next generation of labour, children of our today's workers. In the process, the immediate victim may well be the economy of the country. But, in a matter of years, workers themselves will pay the price, either in the form of their own unemployment or that of their children.

Good News for UNESCO

The latest signals from the Clinton administration should be music to Unesco. After an absence of nearly a decade, there are now indications that United States may return to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The US withdrawal in 1984, which was followed by Britain and Singapore in 1985, left Unesco 30 per cent short in its regular budget. It was US and UK's reaction to the Third World sponsored New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), a programme to break the western monopoly hold on media and information flow, that triggered the withdrawal process. The subsequent replacement of the Senegalese Director-General of Unesco, Amadou Mahtar M'bow, a great supporter of NWICO, by the Spanish scientist Federico Mayor, brought in a radical transformation of Unesco media programme. All points of western concern about media freedom were removed. Yet Unesco was unable to bring back within two of its founder members. Hint of the US's return is thus such a good news for Unesco.

We welcome the signs, far from executive decisions yet, that US is seriously thinking of returning to the part of UN that promotes education, science and culture. The US support in Unesco's education programmes was sorely missed. Following the observance of 1990 as the International Literacy Year, and the World Conference on Education For All, in Thailand in the same year which adopted the programme of Education For All by the Year 2000, US's re-entry into Unesco has become most essential. For a country like Bangladesh which depends enormously on international assistance to fund its massive educational programmes, the rejuvenation of an organisation like Unesco, through the return of United States, cannot but be a matter of great joy. We hope that the Clinton administration would act quickly in this direction and take the decision of its return as soon as possible. We also hope that UK and Singapore will follow suit, as their reasons for withdrawal were the same as those for the US.

There is a tremendous need to give a new momentum to the global and national movement to eradicate illiteracy. In this movement the organisation — UNESCO — that has been playing a leading role, and continues to do so, should be made as strong as possible and given as much resources as is possible.

As both the UN and World Bank now place emphasis on human resource development, there should be no second thoughts about pouring greater resources into promoting education.

ONE of the possible ways of capturing the essential rhythm of human history is to look at various movements and protests man had waged and launched in order to assert his position in relation to the surroundings and ambience not always on friendly terms with him. Indeed, the history of man's progress is one of transgressions and assertions, one of breaking and making. And this dialectic is not one that is merely rhythmic, but also rational; for man, over time, learns how to change himself, and for that matter, change his society in consonance with his needs and aspirations. What has come to be known as May Day is, of course, part of history marking man's consciousness and action, his gnosis and praxis — all intended to change his position, his life in the midst of circumstances opposing him. And to change is to work, and to work is to know, and to know is to struggle, and May Day is the day of struggle, work, knowledge and change, and also of love and unity. It is the day of breaking and making, the day of the class to which the future belongs." But how?

Before we attempt to come up with an answer which would obviously zoom in on the inherent, intensive and rich symbolism of May Day, we can look backward at certain historic and temporal signifiers which, over time, have constituted a history of their own. On this day, in 1886, the workers in the city of Chicago laid down their lives for finding a voice, and identity, a society drawing energy from the anthropocentric ideal which celebrates the dignity, value and worth of man's labour. The demand which was rendered in the form of an uncompromising and unflinching protest in the streets of Chicago was

Azfar Hussain who teaches English at Jahangirnagar University and whose area of research, among others, is 'post-colonial and post-modernist Marxism' takes a look at the real and metaphorical potentials of May Day as it is observed in this part of the world. While doing so, he observes both the rhetoricity and necessity of May Day itself in a situation characterised by the archetypal conflict between labour and capital — a conflict still unresolved.

that the workers would not expand labour for more than eight hours a day. The motive underlying this movement was, of course, in the first place a humanistic and socialistic one, which is opposed to the process of de-humanisation and exploitation practised and perpetrated by the profit-hungry industrialists who forced the workers to move beyond the period from dawn to dusk — to work for more than 14 hours a day. In other words, the workers were reduced to machines dwarfed by the unappealable monstrosity of the essential capitalistic drive to earn profit, or to accumulate capital. Hence, the protest. And it was essentially the protest of the working class exhibiting the very realization that a man must struggle for being a man, and that such a struggle must be directed against a repressive, dehumanizing, mere-machine-making culture which abuses, denigrates, devalues and dwarfs — and above all, exploits — one of the essential worths of man, namely, labour. Indeed, the workers on May 1 could demonstrate well that a man is what his labour is, and that labour is an organising principle, a shaping force in human civilization. Therefore, the abuse of labour is the abuse of man, the abuse of his creative potentials. That is just one of the many significances of May Day.

Of course, over more than a hundred years since the Chicago protest had taken

place, the intellectual, moral, aesthetic and politico-economic range of May Day has visibly expanded. But, this expansion is not always real, but sometimes rhetorical too. It would not be unfair, therefore, to look at the significance of May Day in terms of the continuing dialectic of reality and rhetoricity, given the dynamism and stasis of the working class and the legitimization crisis this class confronts today, particularly in the Third World countries including Bangladesh. True, looking backward as well as looking into time present, one clearly finds that what happened in Chicago towards the end of the nineteenth century unequivocally responded to one of the key findings of historical materialism, expressed in Marx's *Capital*: the working-class movement is part and parcel of the laws of motion of capitalism. Marx indicated that when the mass of "misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation grows," there also grows the revolt of the working class, a class constantly exhibiting a numerical increase, a class constantly being "trained, united and organised by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production" (*Capital*, ch. 24). Indeed, in line with the Marxist argument, one can further say that the very monopoly of capital itself turns out to be "a fetter upon the mode of production which has flourished alongside and under it." In fact, at this point, the

phenomenon of breakage and wreckage begins to manifest its own signs, when the centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour "reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument." The protest of the Chicago workers was thus a sign, though not fully shaped into a phenomenon of "bursting asunder," of incompatibility encouraged by the very capitalist mode of production. Thus, interpretable as it is in explicit Marxist terms, May Day has hitherto remained an inspiration and a source of energy for the socialists including the workers and the intellectuals all over the world. Neo-Marxist historian not yet disillusioned with the fall of the Soviet Union and the so-called fall of 'socialism' in the European countries are today found to renew their interest in the working-class movement theories. And obviously they take the real and metaphorical potentials of May Day seriously, which, according to them, fits in well with the tradition of movements the working class has hitherto shaped. For instance, the revolt of the Silesian weavers, the Chartists, the revolutions of 1848 and their aftermath, the Fenian movement, the development of English trade unions, 'cooperative factories' of the labourers themselves, the Paris Commune and the experiences of the first workers' parties, particularly the German Social Democratic

Party, certainly constitute the case of ideological share-holding along with May Day, for all such movements emphasized not only the evils of capitalism, but also brought to the fore, rather dymystified, the power and potentials and the creative energy of man's labour, the most predominant instrument in achieving the progress and prosperity of man at almost every level. Yes, the spirit of May Day was also realized in the Russian Revolution of 1917 with the phenomenal rise of socialism, with the rise of the power of the Proletariat. Despite a head-long succession of crises in socialism as a consequence of malpractices and restless ideological swerving and weakening of the so-called socialist leaders accompanied by the global re-strategizing of the capitalistic, rather, imperialistic, forces, the appeal of the spirit of May Day has not at all diminished. On the contrary, the appeal has increased. The primary reason is simple and clear: the working class has not yet been emancipated. Labour is today being increasingly abused and exploited on a global scale, as the evils of capitalism still persist. The case of Bangladesh is undoubtedly the one where the working class is the worst sufferers, firstly in terms of the abuse of labour. The spirit of May Day is, of course, pertinent to the realities the working class confronts in our country, though most of the working class do not know

what May Day means. It needs mentioning here that to speak of the oppressed working class in Bangladesh is not only to speak of mill and factory workers, but primarily to speak of the peasant workers and agricultural labourers still implicated in the semi-feudalistic semi-capitalistic mode of production. Yes, our agricultural labourers still work from dawn to dusk constituting a labour-day of twelve hours, and the most ironic dimension of all this is that an agricultural labourer, despite his labour-day of 12 hours, receives a daily wage that does not enable him to buy more than two and a half seers of rice. Needless to mention, both the labour-day pattern and the wage-pattern have remained virtually unchanged over decades, indicating the politico-economic and cultural stasis of the working class in Bangladesh. Thus, the rhetoricity of May Day, when it is nationally observed in this part of the world mostly by the middle class intellectuals and workers, becomes more than evident. This rhetoricity, however, does not at all reduce the significance and pertinence of May Day as such. Who would deny the fact that the conflict between capital and the value of labour has not yet been resolved? A number of turns and twists, shifts and transitions, and changes — both slow and theatrical, have been made in the political, economic and cultural lives of people inhabiting this planet, but the conflict between capital and labour is still very much unresolved, as is borne out by the realities we live today and by history itself. As long as this conflict exists, May Day has its meaning invested with ever-expanding energy which certainly speaks of the total emancipation of labour, and for that matter, of the total emancipation of man.

For the Masses Freedom is still Far Away

THERE seems no reprieve from spectre-haunting in Russia. For centuries the spectre of Serfdom and Czarist autocracy haunted the land. Then for more than 70 years came the "spectre Bolshevism".

The felling of the putsch of August 1991 by Russia's so-called democrats was seen by many as the ritual that finally exorcised the ghost of communism.

Before I left Russia last April, President Boris Yeltsin and his team of democrats were performing the last exorcising rituals under the guidance of the International Monetary Fund, freeing prices, removing state subsidies, cutting into shreds the old social security network.

Hardly had the jubiliations greeted the fall of communism died down than Russia found itself in the grip of another spectre — "infantile capitalism".

Last April, capitalism was at its teething stage. Prices were high, but at least a good number of workers could afford to buy chicken in the state shops. Bread and potatoes were still affordable to most of the low-income group and the army of pensioners and war veterans.

The picture I now saw on my latest trip to St Petersburg was both frightening and amusing. Like communism before it, capitalism emerged with two faces — one bright, seductive and beautiful; the other gloomy, despairing and ugly.

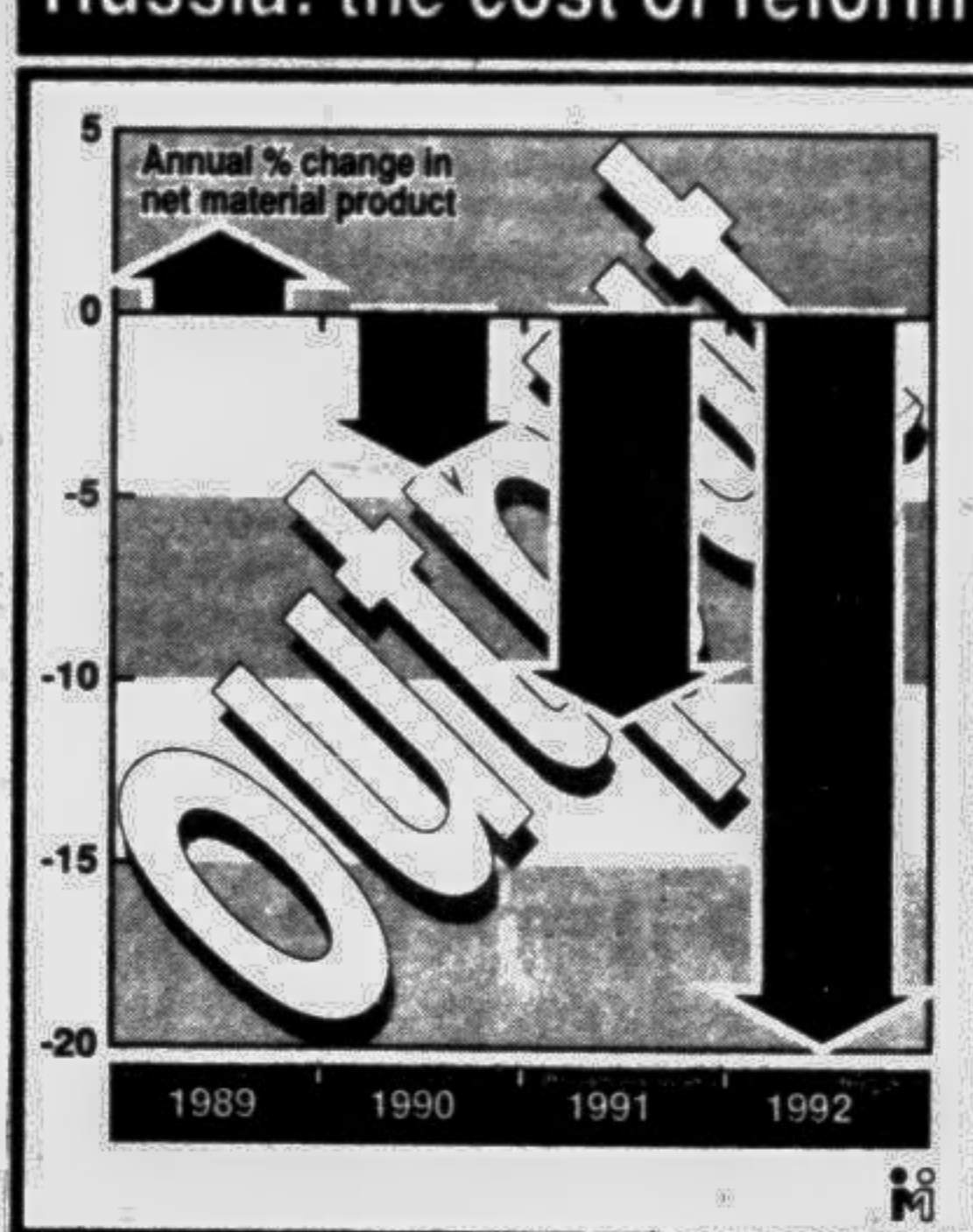
The city which until 1990 proudly bore the name of the V.I. Lenin, founder of Soviet communism with all the moral-

As Boris Yeltsin campaigns across Russia to win support from the people by referendum, their daily lives seem to get harder. Journalist Charles Quist Adade reported from St Petersburg for Gemini News Service for eight years. He left last year for Canada. Eight months later he has returned for a visit. The changes he has found are, he says, both frightening and amusing. A few have found freedom, he reports, but for the masses it is still far away.

ity and puritanism that went with it, is now a cluster of negative images: live sex shows, casinos, night clubs and pornographic movies — dens for the criminal underworld.

But, like bright spots of make-up on an ugly face, neatly-kept Espe, or western joint-venture shops, stuffed with western goods and staffed with smiling attendants, dot the streets of the fast decaying, otherwise beautiful city. Once in a while, a Jaguar, Mercedes, or Ford flashes by in a stiff pothole-

Russia: the cost of reform



dodging competition with a mass of mud-bathed Zaparozhes, Ladas, and Moskviches.

In all I had been away for only eight months, but it seemed like a decade of absence. I was pleasantly surprised at the Pulkovo airport when we landed. Passport and custom checks went so fast and so smoothly I wondered whether we had really arrived in Russia.

My experiences in the city I had lived for nearly a decade ranged from shock to disbelief. "Infantile capitalism" has now

acquired fully-developed canine teeth, gnawing at the vitals of the entire Russian social fabric.

Prices had shot up by more than 3000 per cent within eight months. A loaf of bread was selling at three roubles in April 1992. By December, it was 80 roubles. A pound of meat was 50 roubles. It was now 1,350 roubles. A packet of American cigarettes has risen to 300 roubles from 17 roubles.

The population of the newly-rich or New Russians, as they are called, has also shot up to

three million from a few thousand. So has the number of pimps and street beggars. Crime is on the rampage. According to a 1992 survey, crimes involving the use of firearms in Russia doubled during that year.

The entire city seems paralysed by a consuming fear. Another survey indicated that two-thirds of city dwellers said they felt unsafe walking the streets.

Travel by taxi at night is not safe any more. Said one driver: "Attacks on taxi drivers and passengers is now the order of the day. Many of us have refused to work too late into the night."

The pervasive presence of motley groupings of krishi, or protection rackets, is another sign of new business. Small-bans of predominantly ex-servicemen, ex-convicts and hoodlums trade in intimidation and extortion.

They go after dollars and other stable foreign currency, so foreign businessmen are ready targets.

Said Irina Yesina, 42, a factory worker and former supporter of Yeltsin: "The economy has begun to stabilise for the predatory mafiosi and turncoat apparatchiks." She adds: "It does not matter to me now whether it is the KGB or the mafia who is in power. They will continue to remain callous to the needs of people after lining their pockets."

Yuri Nikiforov lost his job as a lecturer of Marxist-Leninist Philosophy at the St Petersburg School. Paraphrasing Marx with a broad grin, he said: "Man must

eat before he can talk politics."

At 40, Nikiforov is without work. He adds: "What is 900 derevyany (wooden) roubles a month for a family of three? Thank God, I managed to buy my car before these absurdities began. I'm using it for khartur (unlicensed taxi)."

He has refused to go for his social benefit "Out of self-respect." Like Yesina and Nikiforov, most Russians have become apathetic to politics. "As they struggle to eke out a miserable living in their new capitalist environment, ordinary Russians seem to have lost their appetite for political debate."

The few who discussed politics with me appeared weary of, and even exasperated, by Russia's flirtation with democracy. Most reminisced about the "good old days" under communism.

In this apathy lies Yeltsin's biggest danger, as he battles it out with hard-line communists for the control of Russia. Like Mikhail Gorbachev before him, Yeltsin is haunted by two scourges — nascent capitalism and the ghost of communism.

Yet there are a few who still staunchly support Russia's new leader, mainly the newly-rich and business leaders. "Yeltsin brought us into the fold of the civilised world," said insurance broker Andrei Ivanov. "He brought us freedom." Yet, for the teeming Russian masses, freedom is still far away.

CHARLES QUIST ADADE is a Ghanaian journalist who lived and studied in Russia from 1982 to 1992.

To the Editor...

Benazir expected to be back to power

Sir, It must be certain that the General Election will be held in Pakistan within 90 days under the Constitution, that is, on 14 July 1993. I am sure that, through the General Election, Mrs. Benazir Bhutto will be back to power in Pakistan. Like our Acting President during the interim period, Chief Justice Mr Shahabuddin Ahmed, who vowed that "Allah alone can stop the General Election" we hope that the President of Pakistan, Mr Ghulam Ishaq Khan, will have a similar determination to hold the election at the due time.

In this connection I wish to make clear particularly one point. Even in the most advanced countries to-day, chief executives like prime ministers were found to be dishonest and corrupt. Current examples are Italy and Japan. There are other examples both in the developed and developing countries. My simple question is what is it that makes the prime ministers and presidents dishonest and corrupt? They have everything on earth officially given to them. When I heard last time that Mrs Benazir Bhutto and her cabinet were dismissed, it was a pretty great shock to me. I could not believe that Benazir Bhutto, being an Oxford-and-Harvard-trained young educationist and

politician, could be charged with corruption and misuse of power which are anti-social acts. The president's and prime minister's powers are surely embodied in the Constitution which of course may have to be changed according to the needs of the time, in the regular way. However, I detest to hear unnecessary and undignified charges against any president and prime minister and, for that matter, against any minister.

Capitalism is an economic system where corruptions are more common than those under socialism for the very reason that strongest punishments are inflicted on those socially undesirable people under socialism. Dishonest acts are sometimes committed by some administrators in banking and financial institutions, bureaucracy and business. Such persons must be identified and severely dealt with. On occasions, such persons are unjustifiably charged without any foundation. This aspect must also be very carefully looked into by persons of the highest integrity, incorruptible character and great reputation to ensure that no injustices are done to anybody. I am not sure if Mrs Benazir Bhutto and her husband were rightly charged with acts of corruption, because during the regime of the same Pakistani President, they were freed from these charges.

The Bhutto family has already suffered from almost intolerable mental agonies from the unjust execution of Mr ZA Bhutto. It is said that God fulfils himself in many ways and just look at the ultimate fate of late General Zia-ul-Haq. Political murders are of course different. The great question remains whether the death punishment should altogether be abolished except in very exceptional cases. I tend to believe, if Mr Z A Bhutto were alive to-day, the history of the Muslim world and for that matter that of the whole world could have been different from what it is now. The execution of Mr ZA Bhutto removed from the political scene of the world a most colourful personality.

I feel emboldened that Mrs Nusrat Bhutto and her distinguished daughter, Mrs Benazir Bhutto, in spite of their untold mental tortures, faced the situation with great courage and faith. I hope Benazir is destined to play a historic role in the future building up of a country which is Pakistan.

M T Haq
Pallabi, Mirpur, Dhaka

people engaged in non-Govt. jobs do not have pension facilities after their retirement and the country itself cannot take any responsibility towards their financial need after retirement. So the introduction of DPS generated a great interest among the non-Govt officials of all classes and others as well. But recently it has been observed that some of the banks have stopped opening official order from their respective head offices.

In this connection I would like to draw the kind attention of the concerned authorities to continue the DPS account and introduce new schemes with modern banking concepts in greater interest of the people of this country.

Motius Samad Chowdhury
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many also call incompetent) government, we have the taxman's shadow extended to every nook and corner of our homes. The day is perhaps not too far when the taxmen will even enter our kitchen to assess taxes on refrigerators and cooking ranges and other private assets to satisfy the insatiable and ever increasing demand of the government to sustain an ever growing bureaucracy (at the time of writing, there are three bureaucrats of the rank of secretary who are OSDs). Mobilization of domestic resources for development does not only mean collection of taxes by the government, more often than not, mis-spent on non-development accounts. Mobilization also includes leaving enough surpluses with the people for investment and savings activities or for incurring expenditure on agricultural commodities and industrial products, thus creating demand to support economic operations. It's high time we hear less of tax increases and more of what the government is doing to control its expenditures. As a tax payer, I am not convinced that this is happening.

Earlier on, we could understand the logic for license fee on radio and television because this contributed to running the respective broadcasting services, never mind the garbage that is put out as news and current affairs programme or

the politicizing of this media (if the current state of affair continue, BNP should be morally obliged to meet the bill of the electronic media). The government does not provide any service for home video or satellite broadcast. The public have paid heavy import duty and VAT at the stages of import or assembly of VCRs or satellite receivers and on pre-recorded or blank video cassettes. There is also VAT and income tax on video rental shops. How much more should the consumer keep paying as taxes over and over again to sustain such an unnecessarily large and burdensome government? The social scientists have coined a word for this: predatory government, a government that eats away the wealth of the nation. How long should the public quietly bear? The government would do well to cut down on the luxury of over-governance, and withdraw illogical taxes on private possessions, considering that so meager amount of tax is collectible after so much of government effort and collection expenditure. Such a large government is indeed a luxury for a poor country like Bangladesh. Its efforts is better directed towards reducing its enormity and towards expenditure control.

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Deposit Pension Scheme

Sir, Deposit Pension Scheme (DPS) offered by all the banks of Bangladesh created a great interest to all. The

The taxman cometh

Sir, Is it compatible with the right to privacy that tax inspectors should have any reason to intrude into living rooms and bed rooms of private homes to assess and extract taxes on VCRs and satellite broadcast receivers? This seems to be the current dispensation, as taxes are payable on such private possessions. In order to raise resources to sustain the colossal (and which