

For a Constructive Dialogue

The 72-hour SKOP strike, which never was for most of the country, is now over. Anywhere else in the world, a call for three days and nights of work stoppage would qualify anybody or any organisation for a one-way ticket to a mental asylum. But here, and perhaps only here, such calls constitute serious action programmes of trade union bodies and their conglomerates. Whatever historical reasons there may be, call for 72-hour work stoppage is madness at best and, at worse, a conspiracy to destroy whatever meagre productive capacity there is in our country. Now that democracy is restored, a representative government is at the helm of affairs, and a sovereign parliament is in place, no group, however powerful and organised, can be allowed to cause such a damage to the national economy as a 72-hour strike would necessarily inflict.

Though the strike is over, the serious issues behind the controversy with SKOP remain to be addressed. These refer to a sectoral minimum wage as against a national one, linkage between productivity and wage, the issue of disinvesting the loss-incurring public enterprises, etc. The Employers' Association has over and over again produced lengthy research based findings as to how such steps, as being demanded by the SKOP, would seriously damage the prospect of our economic development.

It is natural that workers and employers would see things from different perspectives. But when it comes to national interest, to maintain our competitive edge in the international market, and to increasing our productive capacity so that employment, wage and profit can all increase, we expect our employers and workers to see the bigger picture and come to some sort of understanding.

With the miserable failure of the SKOP's 72-hour strike programme, three things have become very clear. First, and most importantly, that people are tired of strikes and hartals, and that they have rejected it as a part of political and trade union activities. This is crystal clear, and this message must be understood by all trade unions and political parties.

Secondly, whatever agreement the government had signed with SKOP, there is just not enough resources to implement it. Hence those agreements will have to be reconsidered, and a more realistic agreement will have to be worked out. Here a point needs to be mentioned about the way the government and the concerned ministries handled the SKOP issue from the start. Legitimate questions can be raised as to why the government signed an agreement that it knew it could not, and for the sake of the country should not, honour. Then again, why did it negotiate another understanding with SKOP about implementing the first agreement. In the third stage, there were assurances by the govt that the agreement would be honoured. In fact it was the Employers Association, and the various Chamber bodies who came out in the open, boldly and consistently, and presented the real picture, about the economic consequences of the agreement. This journal has repeatedly urged the government to go public with facts and figures as to why the SKOP demands go against national interest. So far to no avail. The government seems to prefer behind-the-scene negotiations instead of going public.

The third, and final point is that steps must be taken to reopen a more serious dialogue between the workers and employers to negotiate for a pragmatic and affordable agreement. The labour force, through their trade unions, must be brought into confidence, given the total macro and micro economic picture, and persuaded to see things from a national, and not a sectarian, point of view. Employers also must come forward, in all sincerity and earnestness, to offer the best possible deal to the workers. It is in this partnership—critical in our view—that the future of our economic development lies.

Washington and Human Rights

The proposal made by the Clinton administration at a conference in Geneva last week that the United Nations should appoint a high-profile high commissioner for human rights as well as a special envoy to investigate abuses against women deserves far more careful examination than Washington seems to have given it so far. It is reported that the proposal would come up before the UN-sponsored World Conference on Human Rights scheduled for June in Vienna, when, it is said, a number of developing countries, especially China, Iran and Pakistan, might oppose the US proposal.

The Washington move has a number of merits. The abuses of human freedom as well as a gross denial of rights of women are rampant in many countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and now in parts of Eastern Europe. Pressure from international quarters, such as the Amnesty International, certainly helps. However, in the ultimate analysis, it is the change in the international political system paving the establishment of the rule of law and the setting up of an independent judiciary that proves decisive. Again, an arrogant country can defy international pressure, as Israel has done on the question of the rights of people in the occupied territory, and Washington, with all its hold over Tel Aviv has been able to do precious little to bring about a change in the Israel's position. At this moment, we welcome Clinton's move to save Muslims in Bosnia. But it took Washington quite a long time to end its rhetoric and get down to action.

We believe, Washington remains in a strong position to use secret diplomacy with a number of countries which are guilty of violating human rights, without going public, and, wherever possible, use economic assistance as a source of pressure. The danger of involving the United Nations in this exercise lies in adding to the bureaucracy of the world body, at a considerable cost, and then seldom achieving any result for lack of consensus among member nations, represented by their governments. It is certainly time for Washington to give the proposal more thought.

An eminent international banker recently stated, "There are five billion people in the world today out of which only 500 million are bankable", that is rich enough to borrow, invest, make more money and prosper further. The huge bulk, 84 per cent of humanity are practically beyond the reach of the capital for development. This is one extreme view. At the other end of the scale stands the Swedish charity organisation distributing high protein biscuits and garments to the street children of Dhaka and Calcutta. The rigidity of the banker would confine capital to the developed countries alone; while, Swedish charity involved in a very noble task no doubt, can continue ever after with its charity. Neither the banker nor charity would deliver development.

The banker, being hard as the hard currency, is ruling out totally prospects of development for those who need it most. The Swedish charity, being fragile as the biscuit, has relied on the soft option of no lasting benefit.

Banker needs the collateral to advance loan since he cannot risk others' money without the backup assets so that he can eventually liquidate the loan, if need be, and meet the liabilities to the depositors. It is after all Rahim's money advanced to Karim.

When it is the case of asset-less poor, the eminent banker is stuck with billions of depositors' dollars, frozen in the vault. He can finance one single half a billion dollar petrochemical complex but not half

a thousand dollars for purchase of tools by the street-side metal welder. The striking resemblance with Swedish charity is worth noting: They are so willing to dole out foods and clothes but not tools and equipment which have the potential to generate the wherewithals and secure the same food and clothes from the market not once, but on a continued basis.

Development Banking

At this point, the initiative of development banking takes an altogether different position. The way to alleviate poverty is asset creation—enable the poor to acquire assets whose productive use would generate the income as well as create additional wealth after repayments to the bank. A small dose of initial loan first enables the poor to get out of the clutches of the loan sharks and his returns therefore are bound to increase. Next time he acquires the capacity to utilise a bigger dose of loan, he could expand and eventually become a small enterprise operator.

This is the well-tested framework that Grameen Bank has further refined and making good use of for the rapidly expanding credit programme. This is a tremendous achievement. Government, not only of Bangladesh but in very many other countries, had in the past distributed hundreds of millions of dollars worth of such rural credit. Ultimately

most of these credits tend to become welfare grants. Apart from tremendous pressure from political interests and vested groups, failures of such credit schemes are due to lack of the desired management systems and procedures which are effective in terms of disbursement of loans as well as realisation of arrears.

The single most important achievement of Dr Yunus has been the effective management of an ever increasing number of loans running into mil-

lions, disbursing hundreds of millions of Taka worth of credit as well as ensuring the outstanding performance of almost 100 per cent repayment on a sustainable basis. (Please note that the natural disasters like floods or cyclones did not take the bank into the reds). Such achievements were possible in spite of what an eminent international banker would say. He shuns away from 84 per cent of the world's people and remains stuck to the narrow confines of OECD countries.

WINDOW ON ASIA

Shahed Latif

Bankability is ultimately a function of management of loans so that they are channelled into income creating assets, help produce those

goods and services which have markets and immediate income gains are realised so that repayments on time are possible. In the recession-ridden world of today, even the half a billion bankable (fortunate) human beings are toiling without success to make the payments to the banks. In a shrinking market, foreclosure and bankruptcy are the order of the day. Instead, a million loanees of hundred dollars each would still hold on to the inelastic market share since

Grameen Bank still maintains its 100 per cent repayment record. However, the problem with a million loanees of 100 dollars each is extremely high cost of management and administration. Instead, 100 loanees of million dollars each would reduce such costs to a fraction. In theory this is very correct and also in fact in many countries. Bangladesh has proved to be the conspicuous exception. Here 99 per cent who are poor, struggle and repay their debts; while the fortunate one per cent run away with their millions. Such huge overdue loans constitute a nightmare not only for the Finance Minister but the nation as a

whole. Yet we are oblivious to the agonising realities of our financial sector. The situation reminds me of the famous poem "Ostrich" by Sudhindra Nath Dutta: "If eyes are blind, the disaster wouldn't cease." That is what our ostrich mentality daydreams all the while.

Alternative Strategy

As an alternative strategy, why do not we put our faith with the poor and the down-trodden, not with high protein biscuits of charity but with solid cash? Grameen Bank has proved at least a million times with a million loanees who have repaid on time, that the assetless poor are the most bankable provided efficient management systems are in due place.

Unfortunately, it is not the cash but its management which is at the heart of the problem. It is because we have only one Dr Yunus and it would be utterly naive to expect that one Grameen Bank can fight the battle against poverty, single-handed, in a country of 112 million people today, 50 per cent of whom are landless and therefore destitute. I have heard people say that yes, Dr Yunus is doing excellent work but at the rate Grameen Bank is extending its coverage, it would take at least half a century, if not more, to complete the programme. I think exactly the opposite: Grameen Bank should stop its further expansion and consolidate itself. In-

tensify its programme through larger amounts of credit for creating small enterprises manufacturing goods and services that compete in the international marketplace. That is the sound corporate strategy to adopt since Grameen Bank has now attained the status of a large corporate bank of the country, unique in its origin and geared to the poor of the nation.

We need numerous institutions, nationwide, district-based or may be confined to a Thana, for financing micro-ventures of the poor leading to asset creation and income generation; eventually intensifying themselves through financing of bigger ventures—the small enterprise as the hallmark of economic growth and progress. What is important is to adopt the Grameen Bank management practices, fully in letter and spirit. And, herein lies the problem: chances are that spurious institutions would crop up who are more Christian than the Pope. That means the decline and ultimately the ruin. Such institutions must grow from within. It is an organic process. Once the seed is there, it can be nurtured to grow and mature into the second or third or could be many more Grameen Banks of the nation—branching off into new directions.

One Grameen Bank is not the answer to our monumental problem of poverty. How to promote the organic growth of more Grameen Banks? Will Dr Yunus please give us an answer?

AFTERMATH OF GULF WAR

Iraqi Children Dying from Radioactive Bullets?

by Eric Hoskins

RADIOACTIVE bullets made from American nuclear waste and used by coalition forces during the Gulf War may be the cause of mysterious new illnesses that are showing up in Iraqi children, including an increase in childhood cancers. This suspected linkage, as well as the likelihood of serious environmental contamination of soil and water, has alarmed international medical experts who recently returned from Iraq.

For months now, Iraqi and international medical personnel have been perplexed by the appearance in Iraqi children of a number of mysterious and inexplicable post-war illnesses. Almost invariably fatal, this post-war plague also includes a rise in childhood cancers, leukemia being the most common among them.

United Nations personnel and humanitarian aid workers have observed that many Iraqi children play with empty ammunition shells, abandoned weapons and even destroyed tanks. This close physical contact between Iraqi children and Gulf War weaponry was therefore considered when medical experts began their search for the possible causes of these mysterious post-war afflictions.

Their investigations turned up radioactive bullets that can still be found by the thousands strewn all over Iraq. Known as depleted uranium (DU) penetrators, the bullets were developed in the United States in the late 1970s. Cigar-shaped and weighing as much as three or four kilograms, these DU penetrators are anti-tank, armour-piercing projectiles that were regularly fired from coalition tanks, artillery and attack planes during the six-week war against Iraq.

The core of the bullet is made from radioactive nuclear waste. During the uranium enrichment process required to make atomic bombs and nuclear fuel rods, depleted uranium is produced as a useless, but radioactive, by-product. It

Radioactive bullets made from American nuclear waste, used during the Gulf War, are believed to be the cause of mysterious and fatal diseases (including cancer) showing up among Iraqi children.



Bullets made from American nuclear waste (left) are thought to be responsible for the increase in childhood leukaemia in Iraq (right)



is extremely hard, abundantly available, and provided to weapons manufacturers free of charge: three characteristics making it attractive for use in war.

When fired, the DU penetrator's uranium core bursts into a searing-hot flame, enhancing the bullet's ability to pierce the armour plating of tanks and other suitable military targets. Any diesel vapours inside the tank are ignited, and the crew inside is burned alive.

A confidential report by the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority (AEA) estimates that at least 40 tons of depleted uranium were dispersed throughout Iraq during the course of the Gulf War. These radioactive bullets are now being used by many children in Iraq as toys.

Apart from the radioactive exposure to the children and adults handling these shells, public health officials in Iraq fear that the bullets may already have contaminated the

soil and drinking water sources. If environmental contamination has indeed taken place, Iraqi civilians will be exposed to the dangers of depleted uranium radioactivity for many years to come. Certainly such fears of radioactive contamination are not without foundation. In New Mexico where DU penetrators are routinely fired to test production standards, questions have been raised concerning ground water poisoning. And communities in Minnesota and South Dakota, citing concerns over toxicity and the contamination of ground water by radioactivity, have fiercely opposed efforts by Honeywell, the US manufacturer, to locate test ranges in those two states.

Ironically, the US government, testifying in Congress about the proposed use of public lands for testing DU penetrators, also expressed its concern about their hazardous effects. James Parker, then associate director of the Interior

Department's Bureau of Land Management, was referring to DU penetrators when he warned in 1986 that, "the proposed use of the lands for weapons testing could result in the permanent contamination of the land."

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has said that tank crews firing DU penetrators could expect to receive the equivalent of one chest X-ray every 20 to 30 hours. Medical experts generally agree that any radiation exposure increases one's risk of cancer. This risk obviously becomes much higher once the projectile has been fired, and lies broken or oxidising in the open air. Airborne uranium particles easily enter the body, where they are permanently deposited in bones and major organs, from where they launch their assault on the body's cells and their nuclei.

Children are especially vulnerable to uranium poisoning, because their cells are rapidly dividing as they grow.

Absorbed uranium is known to cross the placenta and enter the bloodstream of the developing foetus. The AEA's confidential report, calling the presence of depleted uranium in Iraq and Kuwait a 'significant problem', indicates that there is potentially enough uranium in those two countries to cause 'tens of thousands of deaths'.

Meanwhile, Pentagon spokespersons insist that depleted uranium is 'very, very mildly radioactive', and that the bullets are not radioactive enough to be classified as a 'radiological weapon'.

Several months ago, when the medical director of the prestigious Albert Schweitzer Institute arrived in Berlin carrying with him one of these 'mildly radioactive' DU penetrators retrieved from Iraq, he was immediately arrested by the German authorities and charged with 'illegally releasing ionising radiation'. The DU penetrator he was carrying, its radioactivity confirmed by two independent German laboratories, was quickly sealed in a lead-lined box.

There are no such lead-

lined boxes in Iraq. According to foreign doctors: Iraqi children are playing with these bullets as toys, unaware of their dangerous effects. In one case observed by a foreign doctor, a child in the Iraqi city of Basra was seen playing with severely depleted uranium penetrator shells, having made hand-puppets out of them. Another child, who was known to have handled several shells subsequently developed leukemia.

Even if the link between DU penetrators and the increasing incidence of childhood cancer in Iraq cannot be proven, the potential environmental damage resulting from thousands of radioactive shells dispersed throughout Iraq is bound to raise concerns among both environmentalists and health specialists.

By shipping it overseas 'with the boys' in the form of DU penetrators, the West may have finally found the ultimate tool for the expedient disposal of radioactive nuclear waste. But the idea of discarding our nuclear garbage on the future battlefields of the world, is one that 'is unlikely to get many glowing reviews.'

— Third World Network Features/New Statesmen and Society

Eric Hoskins, a medical doctor, has visited post-war Iraq 12 times, providing humanitarian assistance and documenting the effect of the war on Iraqi children.

OPINION

Smash the Telephone Overbilling Racket

The Ministry of Communication is requested, in public interest, to call a press conference to clarify to the public what steps have been taken by the authorities to smash the telephone overbilling racket, which has now been firmly entrenched in the Telephone Department causing harrowing experience to the subscribers. The unkindest cut is the stand: "First pay the claim then argue about wrong billing."

Last month a friend asked me if I wanted a new digital phone connection, as the subscriber of the line was giving up the phone due to regular overbilling, ranging from five to twelve thousand Taka per month. Last week I learnt that a distant neighbour was doing the same—offering his telephone to others (through proper channel).

The irony of the situation is that I applied for a new connection three years ago, and am still waiting. I do not know if I am on the waiting list, or any waiting list is maintained at all, as under the prevailing malpractices, there would be no point in maintaining a waiting list, as such a list for Dhaka would run into over one lakh new applicants. Now I am scared of having a new residential telephone, as I cannot afford to pay the inflated fictitious bills.

To reduce the ratio between supply and demand, BOT/BLT schemes from the foreign investors are likely to be sabotaged by the militant (and inefficient) unions of the workers and the staff. If the supply exceed the demand, corruption cannot take root, due to competition, provided

there is no monopoly. A new fast growing private service area has to be watched carefully for malpractices: hundreds of small businesses are opening, even in the residential areas, offering Fax, ISD and telephone services to the public. Their monthly telephone line bills must be huge—it is only hoped that they are not being underbilled, under "special" arrangements; and the differences are not attached to other innocent subscribers in the area.

How technical malpractices are being secretly monitored by the Department? How many black sheep have been identified or prosecuted? Such information is never divulged to the press. There was some outlet—the BTV Mukhomukhi programme for two-way communication (without using the telephone).

The minister generally fight shy of meeting the press regularly. The reminders to the Telephone Department are neither acknowledged nor replied to. Each letter must be answered in the public sector. How the Ministry (not the T&T Board) has improved the telephone service, technically and humanly, since the new government came into power? There are a lot of other questions which the reporters would be asking to ensure better service from the slow moving and inefficient Telephone Department.

It looks like there is a need for a thorough overhaul of the T&T Board, the monopoly operators in the country, ruling over the subscribers in an autocratic way.

A Mawaz
Dhaka

To the Editor

Zakat and the destitute

Sir, It has become a common phenomenon that every year, on the occasions of Shab-e-Barat, Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Azha, thousands of destitute men, women and children from rural areas and distant villages crowd the capital city of Dhaka. They move from door to door begging alms, collecting 'halwa-roti', fitra, zakat or sacrificial meat. They pass their nights under the open sky on roads and streets or squeeze themselves in railway stations, river terminal buildings, stadium and shop verandahs. Their sorrows and sufferings know no bound. We always remain as silent spectators, observe and feel for the pitiable condition of the destitute but unfortunately we, our government, the Zakat Board, any NGO, any business magnate or philanthropist seldom take any notable step to mitigate their sufferings.

It is bitter but a hard reality that the destitute would continue to flock into the capital city of Dhaka and other cities, and towns for years to come due to various socio-economic and political reasons. We all ought to, and we are all morally bound to, help the

poor and the needy people with our limited resources. We would, therefore, request the Zakat Board, our city fathers, social workers and philanthropists to kindly consider whether it is possible to set up temporary camps with tarpaulin cover, drinking water supply and sanitary facilities for the destitute and to supply them with 'dal-bhat' or 'khichuri' for 2-3 days during Shab-e-Barat, Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Azha on humanitarian ground.

O H Kabir
Dhaka-1203

In praise of CMP Commissioner

Sir, In the sea of frustrations, murders, hijackings, dacoities and other such de-baucheries afflicting the entire nation, a semblance of hope, pleasure and promise of better days seems to be dawning in Chittagong with the arrival of a new Commissioner of CMP. For ever since his arrival, he has been seen tackling not only the law and order situation but also the movement of traffic is receiving his attention. As a result, perhaps, such choke points as Dhaka Trunk Road, Madarbari, Sadarghat Road,

Port connecting roads and highways, which over the years were fallen into the hands of mafioso operatives who were systematically guiding the traffic movements by innocently blocking the roads as if due to break down of trucks etc. appear to be almost clear and smooth. Abruptly, all such mini garages, workshops, toll-collection offices of legal or illegal or extra legal authorities, truckwalas associations, mastans, street walkers, hijackers, smugglers etc, as if at the wave of a magic wand, seem to have disappeared into thin air.

The entire city is wearing a clean and healthy look with wheels of all types of vehicles being constantly hammered to move on which, as it seems, has instilled a sense of purpose, urgency, discipline, speed and punctuality in the general attendance in mills and factories! Having done away with the roadside vendors, hawkers, dwellers who used to take up the pavements, this has sped up the gait of the pedestrians even, as there is little scope to loiter and become obstacle.

It is, however, being learnt that big toes, that have been stamped have failed in their attempt to retaliate with their

wealth and power. Hence, sentiments are being exploited. A campaign of whispering and for signatures is being launched in the name of petty vendors, hawkers and pavement dwellers as if there is no law or that the poor have suddenly become un-touchables. We do hope, all right thinking persons, relevant authorities will personally look into this sacred progress in Chittagong which can stem the tide of trade, commerce and industries pulling out of Chittagong. Should this dedicated and upright man of sterling character, as it is believed, continue for one year, Chittagong will again wear the mantle of development with mills and factories going on stream at regular intervals.

We frequently hear morbid avalanches of rhetorics when any person of connection dies, but such attributes will be quarantined/boycotted in case of a breathing, serving and living soul for obvious reasons. Nevertheless, friends, relatives and colleagues join me once again conveying our thanks and gratitude to him. Bravo! Titan, do keep up this good show.

Salahuddin Jamal and others
Firozshah, Chittagong