

Challenges for AL

The Awami League (AL) has started identifying its future tasks in a manner which, we hope, will strengthen its organisational base at the grassroots level. This hope rests on the fact that suggestions made by AL leaders at the district level, during the three-day extended meeting, are now being carefully examined by the top decision-making body, including the party chief, Sheikh Hasina.

Judging by press reports, the issues facing the AL leaders belong to three inter-related areas: The need for party discipline, an issue in which the former presidium member Kamal Hossain figures prominently; the call by several district leaders for launching an immediate agitation against the government of Begum Khaleda Zia; and the preparation for the next parliamentary polls.

All these issues involve serious challenges facing the AL leadership. It is said that some kind of a demand has already been made to take "disciplinary measures" against Dr Hossain, against the backdrop of a rumour that the dissident AL leader is all set to launch a new party. In such a situation, the temptation among the top AL leaders to take an offensive against Hossain by expelling him from the party must indeed be very strong, notwithstanding the fact that such a move would turn the noted lawyer into a political martyr and leave him free to select his own line of action.

It is the right of every political party to maintain its discipline in its ranks, but this is as important to a party — whether it is AL or the BNP — as inner democracy. On both the scores, Sheikh Hasina faces conflicting options. Whether the country can produce a strong cohesive third party, even if it turns out to be no more than a coalition of small groupings, remains a matter of speculation. What dismays a cross section of educated elite in the country is that much of the infighting that seems to be going on in AL is essentially personality-oriented. Apart from accusing the AL leadership of ignoring the need for inner-party democracy, Hossain has said precious little, from any open forum, on his policy differences with the organisation he still belongs to. Similarly, outsiders are far from sure if the noted lawyer has committed such violations as to deserve expulsion from AL. The establishment of the Democratic Forum (DF) remains a move in the right direction provided it can evolve as a think tank for AL.

Such a think tank which Sheikh Hasina should make full use of should get down to working out a socio-economic agenda for AL and training prospective candidates for the next parliamentary election. We see such an exercise as an alternative to the call for immediate agitation against the present government, which has come from some district-level AL leaders. Surprisingly enough, some senior leaders have given the call their ardent support, without elaborating on the nature of the agitation and its programme. The demand for agitation would certainly give the government one more talking point about the opposition trying to destabilise the country's development efforts.

In our view, the opposition should start using the Jatiya Sangsad more seriously than it has done in the past and make its debates better focused on economic issues. In achieving this goal, what AL needs is not a wave of sporadic agitation that disrupts the national life but a think tank like DF that helps in the formulation of an effective socio-economic programme. In this context, the establishment of a third party only raises more questions than the country can cope with at this moment.

Premadasa's Unfinished Job

An impassioned article on recently slain President Ranasinghe Premadasa by Mallika Wani-gasundara from Colombo carried in this page yesterday has sought to portray the Sri Lankan president as a leader of the disadvantaged. Notwithstanding the fact that the writer is favourably disposed towards the late president, it becomes clear Premadasa made a difference in the dispensation of the administration through almost an unheard-of reconciliation between economic liberalisation policy of the country and the state intervention. As everybody today knows, the greatest challenge of our time is to bring about a synthesis between privatisation and state support for the most disadvantaged of the society. Premadasa's moderate success in the effort cannot go unrecorded.

However, of the several areas of his success, what stands out most pronouncedly is the model of house building devised for Sri Lanka. This ambitious programme failed to convince many, including the World Bank, that it really stood any chance of being translated into reality. Premadasa's assiduous perseverance and practical vision proved his critics all wrong. Even the World Bank has at last come with funds for the project. Not only did he add 1.5 million houses in a short period of time but also embarked on constructing another equal number of houses now in the process of completion. True to his ideal, he has done this amazing feat with 'minimum intervention and maximum support to the poor house-builder with loans, subsidised materials, advice, guidance and encouragement.'

This sterling performance for a poor country like Sri Lanka has distinguished itself as a country with a lesson for all other developing poor countries to emulate. The success in house building is specially to be savoured by his countrymen because their president took up the programme against all odds and opposition. Premadasa's concern for the poor the world over is further illuminated by the fact that he placed before the United Nations the proposal for declaring 1987 as the Year of Shelter for the Homeless. He has proved a point, the significance of which has been recognised by the UN and therefore deserves to be transcended beyond the Sri Lankan border. But this leaves for his successor at home the onerous job of carrying the unfinished programme on, first of all.

Poverty is not created by poor. Nor it is sustained by them. The roots of poverty can be found in our institutions, concepts and theoretical frameworks.

It is very strange, the way we impose our own imaginations, and make-believe stories to explain the reality of other people's lives. We start believing in our own made-up stories so much that we refuse to accept a different reality even if it stares us in the face. We protect ourselves by dismissing evidence which does not fit into our story.

Today it is big mystery to me why more than a billion people around the world continue to live a life of hunger, malnutrition, disease, and hopelessness. It remains an even bigger mystery why during an age when we are learning to pay attention to the state of environment we remain indifferent to the state of 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 other areas, such as, in design-

Poverty is Not Created by the Poor

by Prof. Md. Yunus

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

Poverty is not created by the poor. Nor it is sustained by them. The roots of poverty can be found in our institutions, concepts and theoretical frameworks.

If we take one institution to illustrate this point I think we'll get plenty of food for thought. In an economy where money is the "open sesame" for any economic action, all we could come up with was financial institutions based on collateral. The underlying principle of all our financial institu-

tions is universally accepted and taken for granted. It says: the more you have, the more you can get; if you don't have anything, you don't get anything. That's it. If you happen to belong to the second category of people, you have almost no chance of starting on your own. You must look for somebody who will hire you.

None of us likes a caste system in any form, anywhere. Nobody should suffer for his/her condition at the start of his/her life. But financial institutions have created a worldwide caste system without anybody being horrified by it. If you don't have collateral you are not creditworthy. That is, for them, you are an "untouchable".

Grameen Bank challenged this caste system — because we felt that access to money is essential to move out of poverty, to unfold one's own potential, to become an active economic agent, to establish one's own human dignity. My

efforts started out of my frustrations with the prevailing economic prescriptions for poverty alleviation — which I found to be very negative. All they can come up with are: public works programmes, "safety net" in the form of handouts, etc. I cannot see how these can be poverty alleviation programmes. These are only programmes to keep the poor physically alive.

We tried something different. We dared to give the poorest people bank credit. We included the destitute women who had never in their lives even touched any money. We defied the rules. At each step, everybody shouted at us: "You are wasting your money; it will never come back; even if it is working now, it will collapse in no time; it will explode into shreds."

Grameen neither exploded nor disappeared. It expanded and reached more and more people. Today, after sixteen years, it services 1.5 million

borrowers; 93 per cent of them are women. It works in 32,000 villages of Bangladesh — that is, almost half of the total number of villages in Bangladesh.

Grameen lends out over US\$ 20 million in Bangladeshi currency each month in tiny loans. Its repayment rate, 98 per cent, is envy of many top banks around the world. Grameen offers housing loans of \$300 each to build a decent tin roof house with a sanitary latrine. Grameen has given housing loans to build more than 170,000 houses, with a repayment rate of nearly 100 per cent.

Now how do we answer the questions like: Are the poor creditworthy? Are the poor "untouchables"?

With Grameen's experience, the answers are very clear. Not only are the poor not "untouchables" — they are "huggables". They are not only creditworthy, in many countries they are more creditworthy

than the non-poor. Will our thinking about the poor and the poverty change because 1.5 million poor people painstakingly have demonstrated every day of the year for the last several years that they can borrow money and change their lives?

Should we continue to accept that poverty and hunger are something that we can only sympathise with and through our best efforts touch them only marginally?

I have come to believe that alleviation of poverty is a matter of will. If poverty is unacceptable to all of us, it can be removed once for all from the surface of the earth. We can make the twentieth century the last century when poverty existed on this earth. The election of President Clinton, who as a Governor took immense interest in Grameen Bank, is a shot in the arm for all of us working for the elimination of poverty.

As the twenty-first century approaches its mid-point, the world will be able to look back and think about the scourge of poverty and hunger as we do now about the plagues which raged during middle ages.

(Extracts from Prof Yunus' acceptance speech on receiving the Humanitarian Award 1993 given by CARE in Washington last recently.)

In late December last year, the Israeli government rounded up 413 Palestinians from the Occupied Territories and expelled them to Lebanon, claiming that they were all members or supporters of HAMAS, the militant Palestinian resistance organisation.

The Palestinians were first taken, blindfolded, into the area of South Lebanon controlled by Israel (Israel's self-declared "security zone"). Attempts were then made to force them to cross over into the area of South Lebanon controlled by the Lebanese government. These attempts, however failed when the Lebanese government refused (as it was entitled to do under international law) to accept them. As a result, the 413 Palestinians were stranded in a strip of no-man's land between the area of Southern Lebanon under Israeli control and that under the control of the Lebanese government.

The plight of these 400 Palestinians, confined to a small strip of land under the most appalling and primitive conditions, created a major impact on world public opinion. The images of these marooned Palestinians were flashed across TV screens all over the world while newspaper reports splashed the story of their plight on their front pages.

All this brought home to many people around the globe the terror and barbarism that characterises Israeli occupation of the Left Bank and the Gaza Strip. More than any other single incident in recent times, it highlighted the arbitrary nature of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands.

However, what began as an indictment of Israel very soon developed into an indictment of the West and the United Nations. As a result of strong world opinion, the UN Security Council unanimously passed resolution 799 condemning the Israeli action and demanding the immediate and safe return of the expelled Palestinians. However, as expected, Israel refused to comply.

When pressure grew on the Security Council to enforce the resolution, it began to stall for time hoping that an Israeli High Court decision (which was pending following an application on the legality of the expulsion) would pre-empt the need for action. It sent a succession of two envoys to Israel to try to persuade it to comply.

When these efforts failed, and the time came to act, the US warned that it would veto any move to impose sanctions

Double Standards in Western Conduct of International Affairs

by T Rajamoorthy

The phenomenon of double standards in international affairs has caught the attention of the world as a result of the West's differing responses to the problems of the Palestinian, Iraqi and Bosnian people. But it is neither new nor an aberration. It has been a feature of the relations between the West and the Third World since colonial times and has permeated all aspects of the relations between them.

On Israel. In February, the US pressured the UN Security Council to refrain from enforcing the resolution. As a sop, Israel announced that it would allow the return of 100 of the 413 Palestinians.

Coming in the wake of recent Western moves in the UN on Iraq, this blatant inaction on the part of the US and its allies served to crystallise, for millions of people the world over, the whole phenomenon of double standards. In their ruthless zeal to enforce UN resolutions against Iraq, the US and its allies had brought to bear the full weight of their air-power on the Iraq people. Memories of the air strikes on Iraq were still fresh in the mind of the world public. In contrast, Israel was being allowed to go scot-free when she had clearly refused to comply with a UN resolution.

The whole issue of double standards in the West's approach to international affairs was also brought into sharp relief by the West's inaction on the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Despite the death of thousands of Bosnian Muslims, the West had not only failed to intervene to stop the slaughter but had prevented the lawful government of Bosnia-Herzegovina from acquiring arms to defend its own people by imposing a UN-sanctioned arms embargo.

Although the UN had also imposed a no-fly zone in Bosnia-Herzegovina to protect the Muslims, the ban was being violated with impunity by the Serbs and no action was being taken. Here again the contrast with the case of Iraq was striking. Iraq had been bombed because she was alleged to have violated the no-fly zone imposed by the allies — a no-fly zone which, it must be stressed, was not sanctioned by any UN resolution!

The practice of double standards is not a new phenomenon. It has its origins in the colonial era and has characterised the West's relations with the Third World since then. It has been evident in almost every facet of the relations between the West and

the Third World and has permeated every issue of importance in the world today. To take a few recent examples:

Terrorism: No state in the world has denounced terrorism as vehemently as the US or carried out as extensive a campaign against it as the US. As part of this campaign it has successfully branded some Third World regimes (such as Muammar Gaddafi's Libya) as terrorist. Yet there is probably no other state in history which has carried out and sponsored terrorism on a scale or intensity as the US.

Acts of terror have been carried out by the US government against people in Third World countries either directly (for example Vietnam) or indirectly through its client regimes, (such as Chile after the Pinochet coup in 1973). However, as Noam Chomsky points out, despite this "wholesale terrorism" by the US the term 'terrorism' is only used by the West to characterise Third World regimes which, worst, are guilty of 'retail terrorism'.

The nuclear threat: The US has at all times possessed the largest arsenal of nuclear weapons in the world and is the only country which has used such weapons in war, e.g. the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. It is also the only country which has threatened its use in peace time. Further, the US has consistently refused to give any undertaking that it will not be the first to use nuclear weapons.

Despite this, in the perception of the West, the US has never been a source of any nuclear threat. Such a threat has always been held to emanate from some other source. During the Cold War, it was the USSR that was alleged to pose such a threat whilst in the post-Cold War era the threat is alleged to emanate from a number of Third World countries which are said to aspire to become members of the nuclear club, for example Iraq, North Korea and Pakistan.

Moves by the West to curb the proliferation of such

weapons are clearly being made in a highly selective manner. Thus, the case of Israel which is clearly in possession of a powerful arsenal of nuclear weapons is conveniently disregarded whilst North Korea stands accused, despite the absence of evidence of possessing and manufacturing such weapons.

Non-interference in the internal affairs of states and respect for their sovereignty: Throughout the Cold War, the main charge against the Communist bloc was that it was attempting to subvert the lawful governments of Third World states. When Soviet troops marched into Afghanistan in 1979, the accusation that the Communist bloc was violating the sovereignty and integrity of Third World states reached a new pitch.

Yet throughout this period the US was subverting and toppling many Third World governments which it found politically unacceptable, e.g. the Arbenz government in Guatemala in 1954, the Goulart government in Brazil in 1964, the Mossadegh government in Iran in 1953, the Allende government in Chile in 1973, to name a few. US troops also openly invaded the Dominican Republic in 1965, Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989 and were engaged in open aggressive wars against countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The US sponsored anti-government terrorist armed groups in Nicaragua, Angola and Mozambique.

Apart from these covert and overt moves to topple governments, the US was involved in the murder and attempted assassination of heads of state e.g. Patrice Lumumba of the Congo, and Fidel Castro of Cuba. And when the International Court of Justice ruled that the US action in mining harbours in Nicaragua was illegal, the US government refused to accept the decision or comply with it.

Human rights: The West has long professed concern for human rights in the Third World and the US has particularly been vociferous in this

regard. Thus the human rights records of such Third World states as Libya, Iraq, North Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia and Cuba have come under the most stringent scrutiny.

However, since the Second World War the US has maintained the most cordial relations with some of the most repressive regimes in the world and granted them massive financial assistance, conveniently ignoring their ghastly human rights records. These include many dictators in Latin America, e.g. Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, Batista of Cuba, Pinochet of Chile, the Shah of Iran and repressive dictatorships in Asia such as those of Marcos of the Philippines, Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam, Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee of South Korea, Phibun, Marshall Sarit Thanarat and Thanom Kittikachorn of Thailand.

Protection of ethnic minorities: The US and the West have taken up the cause of protecting ethnic minorities in Iraq. In an unprecedented move, they have created a safe haven for the Kurds in Northern Iraq by means of a UN Security Council resolution. Yet just across the Iraqi border in Turkey, the same Kurdish minority is being persecuted even more ruthlessly

by the Turkish authorities. But there has not even been a murmur of protest or concern about the Kurds in Turkey. Turkey is a NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) ally and presumably, different standards are to apply to the treatment of its minorities.

It should be clear from the above that this latest manifestation of double standards is by no means an aberration. Double standards are an integral product of the struggle of the West to maintain its present hegemony over the Third World. Now that the West has succeeded in hijacking the UN, it is able to push its policies on the Third World through the UN. Double standards thus bear the imprimatur of the UN.

To protect its interests, the West has to politically isolate or eliminate any actual or potential rival or dissident regime which threatens such interests. To cover up such an operation against the dissident state, the West has to invoke some noble cause e.g. furthering human rights or curbing the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

However the real motive behind such a campaign is clearly shown up by the West's non-action in respect of the misdeeds of its allies or client regimes and by its failure to apply the very same standards which it demands of dissident and rival regimes.

In short, so long as the West is intent on maintaining its hegemony, double standards will continue to remain a central feature of the relations between the West and the Third World. — Third World Network Features.

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OPINION

Many Faces of Pahela Baishakh

A F M Jamaluddin

"Esho hey Baishakh, esho, esho" heralded Pahela Baishakh 1400 BS with more than traditional gaiety and an overdose of festivities all round.

Since early morning, people of all ages — young and old, men and women, children and teenagers — began to trek towards the famous "Botomul" of the lush green Ramna Park. Thanks to Chhayanaut, this "Botomul" serves as the centre to rejuvenate the Bengali psyche since mid-sixties. Regrettably, the government media failed to make any mention of this single largest congregation of the day.

Besides Chhayanaut's early morning musical soiree, the other striking function of the day was a very colourful and joyful rally by the students of the Institute of Fine Arts, Dhaka. Their mobile floats of giant-size tigers, horses, elephants, tortoise, peacocks, butterflies and other brightly coloured birds and animals surely brought a twinkle of awe in the yearning eyes of the youngsters. It was unadulterated fun and frolic, befitting the mood and atmosphere of Pahela Baishakh.

Various political organisations including BNP and AL, and other socio-cultural organisations chalked out elaborate programmes to greet the year 1400 BS. Even Sonargaon Hotel pitched in their contribution on Pahela Baishakh. Guests of the 5-star hotel were able to go on horse cart rides for one hour on the day 'free of cost'! A traditional Bangladeshi cultural programme was performed at its restaurant during dinner on the day to the sheer delight of eager guests.

However, the most incompatible function of the day was "Karate" training course for women and girls, arranged by the Bangladesh Girl Guides

Association. Once wonders what relation does this "martial art" have with the happy occasion of Pahela Baishakh (or were the organisers trying to establish a "curious" link between "Karate" and traditional "Lathi" or "Boli Khela" of Bengal)? Perhaps the organisers know best.

According to newspaper reports, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs has earmarked a budget of Tk 80 lac to hold various functions throughout the year. And the Bangla Academy will spend about Tk 33 lac to greet the new year by holding seminars, staging of dramas and publication of literary works.

But, pardon me if I am wrong, wouldn't it be more judicious to spend this money for the "have-nots" in our society? The malnourished infants of the slums? The illiterate "tokais" in the streets? The starving numbers of half-starved parents of a sickly nation? Will the holding of seminars, dramas, fairs and publication of literary works change the luck of these "children of a lesser god"? Why don't we have the moral courage to take bold steps and change the old order by ushering in the new? Why are we so deaf blind as not to see the helpless faces of the poor who are suffering, waiting for a helping hand from us? Why are we so deaf to the anguished cries of hunger and poverty, of misery and illiteracy of our fellow men?

Let us pause for a moment and question our conscience: What noble resolution have we taken on Pahela Baishakh to bring smiles to these many fading faces in the crowd? Surely the answer lies in the dark clouds and howling winds of "Kal Baishakh". Don't we hang our heads in shame, pronounced: "Gully"?

To the Editor...

Cycle 2 Summit

Sir, Not-too-late SAARC summit in Bangladesh concluded with a communique desperately seeking what could be vital for this unique region faced with alarming poverty which largely replaced its aspiration for advancement with remedial measures for subsistence.

The repeated futile attempts to stage the annual get-together contributed to reviving the tempo of regionalism subdued by communal fury and subsequently to zealous motive for unity in diversity that got all acts together where this group of seven South Asian states originated.

King, Presidents, and Prime Ministers representing over a billion peoples belonging to scores of nations and faiths in this Indic Civilization flooded the host country again with the world's media attention after her worst natural disaster two years ago.

Enriched with soothing extra-subcontinental decorations signifying this ancient region's cultural authenticity in the international atmosphere with meditating mood was the key

role played by the host impressively to serve the purpose of assembly of the group leaders.

In the business as usual, both parity and disparity underlined the rhetoric covering outstanding issues as well as the proposed grounds of interactions which should provide impetus to the neighbourliness toward minimizing differences between the South Asian nations.

Overriding all other urgencies, poverty alleviation placed on top priority as a regional target emphasizing the basic needs to start with (with a view to breaking the Vicious Circle) was deservedly the most commendable result Dhaka Summit produced.

Among the shortcomings of the summit were obviously the economic constraints that have to judiciously control this less fortunate group's activities including frequency of meetings conforming to a realistic budget without impeding the promotion of the welfare of South Asian populace while preserving the genuine regional character.

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Public money

Sir, Some of our bureaucrats, technocrats, foreign donors and experts, consultants and specialists are more interested in holding seminar, conference, workshop and symposium, making tour programmes, preparing and reading key note papers and planning all the time. But in the practical field, they cut a sorry figure and their performances have been very poor.

We do not know whether our public exchequer maintains any book of account on foreign tours, seminars, workshops, symposiums and entertainments.

Who are benefited by these pomp and show and ostentatious activities? Our poor people get poorer day by day — they are deprived of the basic necessities of life and their sufferings know no bound.

We would request all concerned to kindly utilise each Taka of our public money and ensure that when any money is spent our poverty stricken people get good return out of it.

Saying 'no' to hartal

Sir, It has been observed that hartal has gradually lost its popularity to all sections of people, other than to some group leaders. How long can hartal continue in a country like ours? We are a poor nation, a large section of our people are day labourers, how long can they earn their humble living if hartal continues like this? Now time has come when all should reject hartal and take a stand against it. Demand for increase in wages will be legitimate only when production will increase in mills and factories and then problems can surely be solved through discussions.

In this connection we would like to suggest that the bad impacts and sufferings of the people due to hartals should be exposed in BTV, Radio and all national dailies. BTV can take the most effective role by exposing the extent of miseries of rickshaw-pullers or day labourers, untold sufferings of emergency patients due to immobility of transports and above all, the economic hemorrhage caused to the nation.

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