

Need for a Fresh Look at Wage Earners

In the context of the proposed full convertibility of taka on trade account, there is an urgent need for expanding and streamlining existing facilities for remittance of funds by our wage earners abroad through normal banking channel.

Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman in his budget speech said the other day that the number of wage earners abroad grew to 1.88 lakhs in 1992 from 1.01 lakhs in 1989. Simple arithmetic tells us that here, growth over a period of three years exceeded 80 per cent.

In the same speech, the Finance Minister also said that wage earners' remittances during fiscal '92-93 would come close to a billion or, a thousand million dollars. As far as we know, three years back, i.e., in fiscal '89-90, the level of wage earners' remittances was 750 million dollars. In other words, remittances over a period of three years grew by one-third, say 33 per cent.

Putting these two sets of numbers side by side, we see that while the number of wage earners grew by over 80 per cent in three years, remittances came up by only 33 per cent in roughly the same period. Performances do not seem to match.

There could be understandable reasons for this apparent anomaly. For instance, the addition to the number of wage earners may have come mostly from unskilled category of labour who would naturally earn less. Then again, these people may have gone to countries where wages are low relative to the Gulf region. And yet, are such reasons sufficient to explain what appears to us, as a rather wide variation?

It is widely believed that a considerable proportion of the funds, sent home by our wage earners abroad, is channeled through an unofficial and unauthorised conduit — commonly known as 'hundi' business. The country is deprived of the foreign exchange through such transactions. Foreign currency funds of the wage earner go to a third country. These 'hundi' operators have their 'agents' in this country, through whom, we understand, the taka equivalent of the foreign currency is delivered to the wage earner's nominee at home. The service, we are told, is smooth and faster than the banking channel. Besides, the taka equivalent so paid often turns out to be higher than what the official conversion rate would fetch, particularly when the official exchange rate is unrealistically low.

Otherwise also, facilities available for remittance through official channel are reported to be quite inadequate in countries such as the USA, Italy, Germany and Japan, where a substantial number of Bangladeshis are working. Quite some time back, we were told that our banks would open branches in the USA. During the visit of the Prime Minister to Italy last year, Bangladeshi workers there had asked for branches of our banks. Nothing much seems to have happened in this area since then.

Now that taka is being made convertible on trade account, it has become all the more imperative to tackle the situation urgently. Under the new foreign exchange regime, the par value of taka would reflect its market price. This should normally encourage the wage earner abroad to remit his funds through the banking channel. However, the whole thing would flop unless the system is toned up.

In his budget speech, the Finance Minister said that the government was now engaged in gearing appropriate institutional arrangements for smooth transition and operation of the new foreign exchange regime. We trust that the issue raised by us here will figure in this exercise. Unless this matter also is taken care of, the change-over could very well make the situation worse.

An Export, with a Difference

Zimbabwe has an unusual export to sell to the world, some 20,000 elephants. A recent report says that the African country has some 70,000 elephants and there are too many of them for ecological balance. Hence, the decision to sell some 20,000 of them to countries which may want them for their zoos or for working in forest areas.

One hopes that Harare will not rush into this exercise just for the sake of earning hard cash. We may not know how much an elephant will fetch. But there may well be many who would want one just for the sake of its tusk and use the ivory for commercial purposes. How would the government of Zimbabwe make sure this does not happen? What kind of control can Harare have over the fate of an elephant that is already sold to another country, perhaps to the highest bidder? One answer should surely be to sell these animals only to governments and to find out what they will be used for. It should also be possible to involve the Geneva-based organisation concerned with the protection of wild life in this exercise. All this calls for planning and careful consultation. We have every hope that Harare will not treat the matter lightly.

In this case, Zimbabwe is taking a step back into history. According to experts, the first elephant that came to China centuries ago was a gift from a court of a black African king, a move that paved the way for close trade and commercial ties between two faraway continents. Whether Beijing would now be interested in importing a few elephants from Zimbabwe remains to be seen. It won't be a bad move — for the sake of history.

The Other Cleansing — Croats Turn on Muslims, too

Petar Hadji-Ristic writes from Mostar, Bosnia

While the world was transfixed by the agony of the Muslims in Serbian-controlled Bosnia, the Croats were working to rid themselves of their Muslim neighbours. For months they have been grabbing territory in southern and central Bosnia and cleansing the land of Muslims. A Gemini News Service correspondent reports how neighbours are killing each other in Bosnia's vicious civil war.

THE old man without legs looked a forlorn figure propped up on a mattress in a room crammed with empty beds in the refugee centre.

Beyond the closed door, scores of Muslim women swarmed around United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) officials protesting against the news that they would be thrown out of Mostar by nightfall.

Three days earlier, the man said, Croatian Defence Council (HVO) soldiers had ordered him out of his home — one of the finest buildings in Mostar, a centre of liberal Muslim society in former Yugoslavia — and then set it alight.

"Croatian soldiers burnt many houses, shops and restaurants. They did it because I am a Muslim," he said. In the virtually deserted rubble-strewn streets outside, the occasional burst of automatic gunfire was heard, even though it was already several hours past the truce deadline agreed between Bosnian Croats and Muslims in Medjugorje.

HVO's anti-aircraft guns had been pulled back from vantage positions overlooking the city from where they had pounded the Muslims on the left bank of the river Neretva two days earlier. But no one had time to clear the roads of spent ammunition before UN forces travelled in their armoured personnel carriers to inspect the damage.

The Medjugorje meeting called by Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, the man arming his Bosnian Croat allies, had agreed that Bosnian Croats and Muslims should establish interim authorities in three of the provinces set out in the Vance-Owen peace plan. The European Community's peace negotiator Lord Owen hoped that he had headed off the partition of Bosnia and a Croatian march towards a separate republic of Herceg-Bosna.

Some UN officials were sceptical of how long this sudden, miraculous peace would hold. Within days there were reports of renewed fighting. Said one UN representative: "The Croats thought they could complete their military offensive on Mostar within three

days." Why such a fierce battle over one city between Croats and Muslims, who only last year had been fighting together to push Bosnian Serbs out of the region?

The extremist Croats have set their sights on making Mostar the capital of their so-called Herceg-Bosna. Croatian Community, an invention first heard of just over a year ago. The region has a flag now seen everywhere in southern Bosnia with almost identical colours and check shield as those of the Republic of Croatia, and its own army — the HVO, for which the Republic of Croatia issues press passes in Zagreb.

This has meant driving Muslims out of the city they once shared, at least to the left bank of the river Neretva. Down in the Neretva valley where Mostar lies and some 30 kilometres away in Jablanica, where fighting has also been reported, are two other reasons for the battle: a

military aircraft factory and a hydro-electric plant.

Owen's spokesman Fred Eckhardt explained: "The war has a dynamic of its own. It is a battle for territory, power grids and arms plants — for the assets of Bosnia-Herzegovina."

It is a battle that has already turned half the population into refugees and killed more than 200,000 people. A UN official reported that Bosnian Croats have been pushing Muslims to the north and encouraging Croats there to move to the south. "They have learned from the Serbs and are also ethnically cleansing. But they are doing it in a more organised way," said Houssam Mahlen, a UNHCR official, at the British UN base at Gornji Vacuf, central Bosnia.

This meant blowing up bridges and controlling access to territory with road blocks. This was the method the Serbs used to take possession of 70 per cent of Bosnia and control

a 1,000 km frontline.

Travelling north along UN convoy routes through one road block after another, one sees how systematic the campaign of terror has been. Many Muslim houses in villages of mixed communities have been gutted by fire.

Investigating fully what has been going on is impossible. UN press passes might enable one to slip in behind aid convoys with their armoured escorts but they are of use only along the few officially designated UNHCR aid routes.

Even these routes are dangerous in anything other than armoured cars. Whenever one travels there is a risk of sniper fire and the crack from hidden marksmen in the hills inevitably rings out when you pause before ruined houses.

Many refugees who could tell what has happened behind the aid routes could also be trapped by roadblocks in the countryside, unable to get to the main population centres.

In the central Bosnian city of Zenica, its population swelled by more than 40,000 Muslim refugees, there is a hint of what has been going on. At one refugee centre a man told how more than 100 of his fellow villagers in Ahmici perished at the hands of Croats. "Sixty were burnt alive in their homes," he said, adding that UN soldiers handed him the remains of his relatives in a plastic bag. A visit confirmed the devastation. No one remains except a gunman sniping in the hills.

Not even the presence of several thousand British UN soldiers a few kilometres away deterred the Croatian execution squads. The town of Vitez, a few hundred metres from a British base, was laid to ruin in an orgy of destruction. Towards the north in the town of Zavidovic, a few kilometres from the frontline held by the Serbs, the Muslims are now caught in a vice between Croats to the south and Serbs

in the north. Virtually everyone was without work. Croatian roadblocks prevented materials getting in and out. UNHCR food was not getting through to everyone.

Said Vahdeta Zhuzak, typist at Bosnian army headquarters: "The Croats take the food at the barricades and sell it for deutchmarks in the town. We have got used to it." As she spoke outside the headquarters a Serbian mortar fell on the town centre. The Muslims could hardly return fire. They are short of ammunition.

Wherever you go in central Bosnia, Muslims are calling for a lifting of the arms embargo. Said one Bosnian commander: "Your sympathy does me no good. We need arms to defend ourselves."

But one senses that the fate of the Muslims in central Bosnia will be different from that of those in Serbian-controlled territory. "I was a fighter, I am a fighter and I will always be a fighter," shouted one Muslim standing in front of gutted houses.

It is the nightmare of a slide into anarchy, never-ending fighting and Muslim terrorism to avenge their dispossession that drives Lord Owen on in this quest to see the Vance-Owen plan implemented. "There is no way the Muslims will allow a partition of Bosnia," he said. "A three-way split would be like Lebanon. They will go on fighting and fighting."

Everyone agrees the plan is in deep trouble. Many international observers say it is dead. But European Community governments insist it is not. Yet as tension builds, it is beginning to look as though hundreds of thousands of UN troops — not tens of thousands — would be needed to bring peace just in this region, let alone to "stitch Bosnia together".

Said one man ominously: "It is too late. Bosnia is finished. It is a shame for the world. Whatever happens now it will not be good."

PETAR HADJI-RISTIC is a Berlin-based film maker. He has recently spent several weeks travelling in Bosnia and Croatia making a documentary.

Bosnia: the state of the war



BACK TO DEVASTATION A Croatian woman returns to her ruined home in UN-protected West Slavonia.

Growing International Support for Human Rights

A few years ago, an enquiry about human rights issues in the Soviet Union and other eastern European countries would have been fiercely resisted with the response that it was an unwarranted interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign country.

Now not even the well-known historical human rights documents — Britain's Magna Carta, the American Bill of Rights, France's Declaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen (the Rights of Man and Citizen), and the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights — could be said to have spurred universal changes comparable to those of the recent past.

As a measure of the importance the British Government attaches to this issue, aid to developing countries is now closely linked to the development of sound economic policies, democratic accountability and respect for human rights.

Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd has often stressed this point. "Aid must go where it can do most good; and to be effective, aid must be accompanied by sound economic policies, respect for the rule of law and political pluralism," in short good government," he said.

Multi-party Democracy The latest edition of an important book, "World Human Rights Guide", published in 1992 by the Oxford University Press, reveals the far-reaching changes taking place worldwide. The survey grades every

country in terms of their human rights record and shows that between 1986 and 1991, there has been a significant trend toward greater respect for human rights.

For example, it claims that 48% of the world's population enjoyed multi-party democracy in 1991 compared to 40% in 1986. On the opposite direction, the population under one party or one person rule declined from 51% in 1986 to 44% in 1991, and those under military rule from 9% to 8% over the same period.

In assessing individual countries, the survey says the human rights record of the Soviet Union before its dissolution improved from 20% to 54% by the time the third edition of this guide was compiled. Other eastern European countries had also generally improved their record.

Among the developing countries, Chile had enhanced theirs from 35% in 1986 to 80%. But Africa still remains an unhappy experience with only four countries — Benin, Ivory Coast, Botswana and Namibia — as the exception.

International Tide Even then attempts are being made in Africa to flow with the international tide and mood by producing local human rights charters. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights conference to be held in Banjul, The Gambia, in October this year will set a trend for the future.

Meanwhile, the usefulness of this new publication is underlined by the fact that the

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) used it as the basis for its Human Freedom Index, an exercise in the classification of countries by their human rights performance.

The final report of the UNDP project described Mr Humana's work as "the most systematic and extensive coverage" of all attempts to classify and measure human rights.

Not unexpectedly, the issues raised in this important guide lead to several controversial concerns relating, for instance, to queries about the authenticity of the information provided, the author's background and motive, the methodology used to gather the information and the purpose to which the information compiled will be put.

British Journalist

The author Charles Humana, who died in 1992 before the publication of the latest edition, was a British journalist who at the end of the seventies worked as a volunteer for Amnesty International (AI), the London-based independent human rights organisation. Established in 1961, AI now has members in over 100 countries and more than 2000 adoption groups.

Amnesty works to free people imprisoned for their beliefs, colour, ethnic origin, sex, religion or language provided they have neither used nor advocated violence. In 1977 it won the Nobel peace prize for its work which includes

demonstrations, letter writing campaigns, sending observers to political trials and investigating prison conditions.

It was while working with AI that Charles Humana had the idea of adding to the organisation's efforts by creating a worldwide awareness of human rights issues through the compilation of a taxonomy of human rights; a book which would update the assessment of human rights in every country.

The first and second editions were published in 1983 and 1986 and even though the original intention was to update it every three to four years, this could not be met for the current edition due to the political and social changes that were destabilising eastern Europe, southern Africa, and parts of Asia and which at any moment could overthrow governments and systems.

Third Edition

However, by 1991 the political outlook of most of eastern Europe had become clearer, making it possible for work to start on the third edition.

Mr Humana realised that he needed to devise an acceptable methodology to assess the human rights condition in political and culturally different countries ranging from Afghanistan to Zambia, and Argentina to Zaire. His solution was to draw up a list of 40 questions with which he would test the quality of an aspect of

human rights. Some of crucial points he raised in the questionnaire are whether a citizen of a country has the right to freedom of movement within the borders of the state, freedom to leave the country, conduct peaceful assembly and hold opinions without interference.

The assessment criteria also include looking into whether in any country people are not subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, arbitrary arrest or detention, and whether men and women of full age are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.

Besides the AI and the "World Human Rights Guide", another organisation doing much to highlight Britain's commitment to enhancing human rights worldwide is the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

Democratic Institutions

Established in March 1992 after consultations between the British Government and political parties, this organisation has been providing assistance in building and strengthening pluralist democratic institutions overseas.

The three main political parties in Britain are each represented on the Foundation's Board of Governors with the smaller parties having one representative. There are also non-party figures drawn from business, the trade unions, the academic world and the non-governmental sector.

The Foundation is headed

by Diana Warwick who believes that building pluralist institutions overseas will lead to political stability and thereby provide the right atmosphere for economic growth.

Operating on a grant of £1 million from the British Government and expecting to be supplemented with contributions from the private sector, the Foundation has so far provided support to various overseas institutions and organisations.

These include providing air fares and accommodation for 20 African Youth Leaders at the African Youth Leaders Conference, office equipment for Malawi's Democratic Alliance, technical assistance to strengthen three Romanian Conservative Parties, a second-hand printing press for the Russian Social Democratic Party and air fares for British participants in a conference for Conservative Central and east European politicians.

The task ahead for the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, Amnesty International and other London-based voluntary organisations is meant to be achieved within the British tradition and reputation as the "Mother of Democracy", but as pointed out by the chief executive of the Westminster Foundation, "our task is not to sell the Westminster form of democracy." — LPS

The writer is the Principal Information and Research Officer, London Borough of Waltham Forest.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Tax on imported books

Sir, It is heartening to note that maximum fund has been proposed for education in the budget of 1993-94. But what a crucial farce it is that seven and half per cent tax has been proposed to be imposed on imported books! Higher education and research of our country fully depend on imported books and journals.

Without books, education cannot be imparted and without journals, experiences of others cannot be shared. Already due to price hike in international market and devaluation of foreign currencies from time to time, in our country foreign books and journals have be-

come very dear to our students, teachers and research scholars. Even universities, the highest seats of learning in the country, having maximum book budget, cannot import all the books and journals they require. In that case, will the imposition of this extra tax burden on imported books increase the procurement capability of the universities and so raise the standard of higher education and research in the country?

In 1974-75 financial year, the Awami League government attempted to impose some taxes on imported literatures, but due to our strong protest along with that of the Teachers' Associations of the Universities the proposed tax was

abandoned. Since then no government tried to do so. As a signatory of the UNESCO agreement, our government too, cannot impose any tax on free flow of books. Knowledge wherever generated belong to the whole community of the world. There should be no impediment in the flow of knowledge. So the present government of the people should rethink and abandon the idea of imposing taxes on imported books for the healthy growth and development of education and research in our country.

Abu Baker Siddique, Ex Librarian, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, Dhaka. & Md. Zillur Rahman Librarian, Department of Public Libraries, Shahbag, Dhaka.

Educating the girls

Sir, All policy makers are agreeable and agreed that the best investment that a largely illiterate country can make is to

educate its girls. The last remaining years of the twentieth century beckon us to shake off our lethargy, apathy and indifference, and join in a supreme effort to banish female illiteracy from the face of Bangladesh. To educate a female child is to educate a whole family and not an individual. We will be hard put to find an illiterate family, where there is an educated mother. Let the two remaining years of the Fourth FYP and the Fifth FYP see a women centered education and development.

The Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia and repeatedly called for a national social movement to remove illiteracy, and she has also directed that girl students upto Class VIII would receive free education.

The BNP government has now to implement the lead given by our Prime Minister. Unless there is a complete political will and commitment, the nation will falter and fumble, and the policy will end in a fiasco. The economists are agreed that there cannot be a meaningful development in a country un-

less the national literacy rate is at least forty per cent.

Shahabuddin Mahiab, Siddheswar Road, Dhaka

Eid-ul-Azha and Thoughts on Sacrifice

Sir, I am appalled — much, by what Syed Ashraf Ali says in his letter "Eid-ul-Azha and Thoughts on Sacrifice" (Star June 13) in response to my article of June 1, with the same title. It is an irony that while the writer "spits" doubt regarding his knowledge about the particular doctrine I follow and expresses his pains to know that my "Allah seems to have failed in His mission...". But declares: "As a 'God' fearing Muslim, I believe, and am bound to believe..." And then what he says is all meaningless to me — one who cares to be aware of the existence of Allah and His holy scriptures. The ritual of the sacrificial act on Eid-ul-Azha did not begin from the time of Hazrat Ibrahim but much later. It would have been so helpful if he were specific

instead of being aggressive.

In my article I had merely mentioned "it seems" which does not necessarily prove that "He has" but what Syed Ashraf Ali writes terrifies me! He says "He (Allah) is the Doer of all" (Allah), which, if true has little or no meaning to the doings of the Satan. Who then does Syed Ashraf blame for all the wrong doings taking place in the worldly affairs? After all, what are the works of the Satan and his followers?

In my article I had sought for genuine correction and forgiveness if I had faltered. It was done in sincerity. There was no need to attack me personally.

But Syed Ashraf Ali being a "God fearing Muslim" has questioned my faith! I am sorry to say that in Islam there is no God but Allah only. Syed Ashraf Ali could have said something on Eid-ul-Azha itself, rather than reminding us of the powers of the Creator.

Mujibul Haque, Dhaka