

A Disgraceful Sell-out

The UN-backed peace plan for Bosnia is dead, so declared Lord Owen on Thursday and immediately urged the Muslim-led government in Sarajevo to accept the proposal of its enemies, the Serbian and Croatian factions, to divide Bosnia into three ethnically homogeneous states.

Owen who had been working on the conflict for past 10 months on behalf of the European Community (EC) together with the UN representative, Cyrus Vance, got support for his position from where he wanted it most, the United States. Losing little time, Secretary of State Warren M. Christopher "opened the door to the US acceptance of the partition of Bosnia", to quote from a report of the Washington Post. Christopher went even further by taking the paradoxical position that "although the Clinton administration continued to support UN resolutions endorsing Bosnia's territorial integrity" his backing of the Owen proposal was "our current position" in what the learned US official termed as a "dynamic situation."

It is anything but a "dynamic" situation. It is an utterly disgraceful one, a virtual sell-out of Muslims of Bosnia. The partition plan which is supported by the fascist-minded President Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia, the master-mind behind the "ethnic cleansing" of Bosnia, and Croatian president Franjo Tujman is seen by the government in Sarajevo as capitulation. If it is ever put into effect.

This is precisely the way the Washington Post has described the situation in its report on Friday. It said, "The advice (the statement by the EC mediator) marked an astounding turn-about. Lord Owen, in effect, acknowledged that the fate of the Muslim government— recognised by the United States and most European countries in April 1992— was in the hands of Serbian and Croatian enemies and that it will be now be military victors of the war drawing up the final 'peace plan' and dictating it to the Muslims."

We reproduce part of the report, virtually word for word, from the much-respected US daily, not from a sensational speculative publication of the Arab world.

If we find the position taken by his Lordship utterly disgraceful, we are thoroughly bewildered by the instant support given to the Owen proposal by Christopher. It seems to us that Democrat administration's stand on Bosnia, indecisive most of the time and negative on occasions, is worse, much worse, than one taken by the previous Bush government. If nothing else, the Republican administration which left office in January, had opposed the partition of Bosnia. Here, again, is an example of the failure of the Clinton administration to tackle a complex issue in international affairs with understanding, vigour and credibility.

The Owen proposal, now backed by Christopher, offers an agenda for continued conflict through which Serbs and Croats will try to impose the partition plan on Bosnia. This cannot be allowed to happen. The Security Council must meet immediately, re-endorse the territorial integrity of Bosnia and, in no uncertain terms, reject the Owen proposal in the strongest possible language. If the former British Foreign Secretary has gone beyond his mandate, in the process, forgetting his role as a peace-maker, his Lordship should indeed be reprimanded by the United Nations and put in his place. While we commend Islamabad for its acceptance of some 7,000 Bosnians for rehabilitation in Pakistan, it is important that members of OIC, including Bangladesh, demonstrate increased zeal and vigour in defending the rights of Bosnia and, in the present case, in ensuring the rejection of any plan that Sarajevo turns down as an imposition.

Let Them be True National Academies

The Jatiya Sangsad on Saturday told that action has been taken against the Director-General of the Shilpakala Academy as also the Academy's Director of the Dance and Music wing on charges of being responsible for 'dereliction of duty' during the recent SAARC conference. The DG has been served with a show-cause notice which, as things are, he must smooth over by pulling political wires, or move on to another assignment. The Director is under suspension either because he was more closely connected with the said glitches or because he is more a fry than a fish.

Without going into what in fact went wrong in what entertainment programme, it can be said with a sense of disgust that it all smacks of ways totalitarian states had with affairs related with culture and literature. Even in case of such a vaunted statutory learned body as the Bangla Academy, in spite of there being an elected governing council comprising respected man of letters, it is the government in its ignorance and a flair for arrogance befitting only autocracies, chooses both a chairman and a DG more for political reasons than anything else. And these poor fellows have to do their stunts only during the pleasure of whoever happens to be powerful enough in the government and interested enough in the academy. But then things are done with a subtle touch in the Burdwan House matters and that is more than made up by the extreme grossness with which the government handles the other academy.

Is Shilpakala indeed an academy? When the government first thought of launching such an outfit they had perhaps an image of the British Art Council before them. That it has been, over the years, reduced to an entertainment troupe dancing and singing to the tune of the ruling power and having little connection whatsoever with the arts in particular and culture in general, is almost wholly the result of the organisation being directly run by bureaucrats on behalf of the government. The DG and Director who have been proceeded against are being treated as men in charge of an entertainment show kept specifically for the diversion of the government people — and not as principal personnel heading a truly national 'academy'.

It was during the Ayubi military dictatorship that bureaucrats became cultural leaders. While they haven't yet quite abdicated from that position, politicians as their controlling superiors, have found a new and wonderful pasture. It is a measure of their ineptness in the matter that art and culture has boiled down to sheer entertainment.

When will all this end and a semblance of sanity dawn upon the democratically elected and accountable government? If government has to choose the head of the Shilpakala Academy let it choose one who is respected by the whole nation including the government itself.

Bangladesh and India should Avoid Trade War in Jute Goods

EVER since I came across a report in this newspaper a few weeks back to the effect that the Jute Ministry was setting up an export support fund, to be financed from normal budgetary allocations, I have been wondering at the inconsistency of the move with the ongoing reform programme — particularly in the context of the plans to undertake restructuring of the jute sector with assistance from the World Bank.

As the press report has it, the Jute Goods Export Support Fund — has a revolving fund of 2.5 million US dollars, to be met from the government's block allocation in the budget. The Fund would compensate jute goods exporters with the difference between their prices and those of the Indian jute manufacturers' exports. The price differential, the news item continues, would be determined on the basis of a comparison between the national average cost of production of the local jute mills with the price of Indian jute goods. We are told that this move was necessary because our jute products have become uncompetitive in the face of export of low priced Indian goods in the global market.

The Indians might see it as a mini-trade-war. Carried to its natural conclusion, this move will end up in continuous undercutting of export price — impoverishing us in the process — but benefitting the global importers of jute goods. Such a mechanism discourages efficiency by rewarding the inefficient producers most. Administration of such funds breeds rent-seekers and engenders corruption.

What is more important at the present juncture, is the possibility that this move is sending the wrong signal to the jute industry. It's like telling them that the state would continue to subsidise their losses with tax payers' money — notwithstanding the level of their efficiency! However veiled the operation of the mechanism may be, it is an export subsidy.

These days, the plight of the distressed jute mills is often being cited as a glaring example of failure of privatization in this country. Disinvestment, it is argued, has made private sector jute mills even more dependent on the state exchequer. Recapitalisation of mills by the owners themselves to make up for business losses, has become an anathema to them. Rather, they would look towards the government to provide largesse. They also hark back to 1984, it is said, when the then government had restricted exports to stop what it perceived as, disorderly trade — causing loss to the industry. The industry is calling for compensation now for those losses. Well, governments everywhere intervene to serve greater national interest, the argument continues, and is under no obligation to compensate losers under a force majeure situation. Otherwise, exporters of wet-blue leather, lizard skins and, may be, fish and vegetables — could be a host of others — might come up with claims of compensation from the state because the government did, at one time or the other, prohibit export of such goods. This will open the Pandora's box.

Nor is it clear if it was absolutely necessary to set up an export price support fund at this stage. An overseas agency report said the other day that India's jute goods exports fell from \$157 million in 1991-92 to \$111 million in 1992-93 financial (April-March) year. Stiff competition from Bangladesh was assigned as one of the reasons for this

comparative export prices for our and Indian hessian, sacking, carpet backing cloth were \$16, \$38, \$665 and \$16, \$42, \$749 respectively. In December '92, the corresponding comparative numbers were \$14, \$38, \$665 and \$15, \$46, \$852 respectively. Where was then Indian goods under-selling ours?

Has the situation changed dramatically after December '92? Exchange rate movements in the two countries do not exactly bear this out. At the time India floated rupee for transactions on trade account in late March this year, the

FAO data show that in 1991/92, Bangladesh exported 487 thousand tons of jute goods and India 186.2 thousand tons. Thus, the share of these two countries, taken together, accounted for more than 72 per cent of world exports of 930.1 thousand tons. Instead of embarking on 'price war', it would perhaps serve both better if they could cooperate in selling their jute products abroad — by agreeing to an orderly marketing arrangement. Recently concluded South Asian Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAPTA) umbrella agreement might provide a framework for exploring possibilities in this area.

In launching the Jute Goods Export Support Fund, authorities here might have taken cue from India's International Price Reimbursement Scheme (IPRS) which was introduced in 1981 with a few selected items. The scheme's coverage was gradually expanded and a large variety of steel and aluminium products became its main beneficiary. The scheme was intended to compensate Indian exporters with the difference between the domestic and international prices. Although the scheme received some funding from India's Market Development Assistance (MDA) fund, its operations were mainly financed from a cess collected from the main producers. Therein lies the big difference between the Indian compensation scheme and our export support fund! In our case, it would be financed exclusively from budgetary allocation.

In any case, India's MDA has been abolished just recently. Probably, India's IPRS also is on the way out. Meanwhile, an agreement between Bangladesh and the World Bank on the jute sector reform programme is on the way. May be, a deal will be struck by the time this piece goes to the press. World Bank's attitude on the Jute Goods Export Support Fund is not known. Let us hope that it will not stand in the way.

ALONG MY WAY
S B Chaudhuri

decline. Our exporters are not doing that badly then! According to the statistics released by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), monthly export prices of our jute products (f.o.b. port prices) in 1991/92 season, came to \$17 per 100 yards of hessian (40"x10 oz), \$39 per 100 bags of sacking (B-Twills) and \$658 per ton for carpet backing cloth (5.5 oz/36"). Corresponding export prices for Indian jute goods in the same season (f.o.b. price Calcutta inclusive of port and customs charges), were \$18 for hessian, \$45 for sacking and \$675 for carpet backing cloth (150"x5.5 oz). Again, in 1992/93 season, in July '92,

composite rate was around 29 rupees to a dollar. After the floatation, the rupee had been fetching around 32 to a dollar. On the other hand, just about when the formation of the Jute Goods Export Support Fund was announced last April, taka was devalued by two per cent, and now, taka is being made convertible on trade account. So, exchange rate differential alone could hardly account for any massive loss of export competitiveness to impel the authorities to launch the Fund and, for that matter, retain it. Other indicators, such as inflation, export credit interest rate — place our exporters in a better position to compete, with India.

The Woman Blazing a New Refugee Trail

Allan Thompson writes from Ottawa

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The crumbling of empires that ended the Cold War has swollen the world's staggering refugee population, now 19 million. Heading the UN's refugee agency — one of the hottest seats in the United Nations — is a tiny 65-year-old Japanese woman, Sadako Ogata. She is leading the organisation in new directions, but some wonder exactly where she is headed. A Gemini News Service correspondent tries to find out.



SADAKO OGATA
"New ground has been broken"

has meant 600 UNHCR staff becoming directly involved in assisting millions of internally displaced people. In northern Iraq it means helping protect the Kurds and in Tajikistan and Somalia, it means assisting potential refugee populations before they cross borders.

That, despite the fact that the agency's official mandate extends only to refugee who are outside the borders of their home countries, "in areas where internally displaced people and refugees are very closely linked... in these situations we are helping them," Ogata said.

And she rejected the idea of redrafting the UN definition of refugee to codify the kinds of

actions she is taking. She explained: "If you try to amend the convention, I don't know if it would reappear. This is a very delicate balance and the convention provides enough basic principles that we can operate under."

One senior Canadian government source who did not want to be identified said: "The strategy she is using is much different from the traditional UNHCR approach."

What she seems to be doing is taking what is an ad hoc situation, getting a specific mandate from the Secretary-General to deal with that situation, then building on it. At least something is being done. We're not just sitting here talking about it."

In the mayhem that is ex-Yugoslavia, Ogata admits she is almost making up the rules as she goes along. She said: "Mandates and modes of cooperation are developing out of the operational realities with which we're daily being confronted."

For example, the UN has designated "safe areas," around centres like Srebrenica, Zepa, Gorazde, Tuzla and Sarajevo. And sometimes just being there can act as a confidence-building measure to enhance security for people who would otherwise be at risk, she said. "In the context of current realities in Bosnia, international presence, accompanied by massive life-sustaining assistance, may be the only practical form of protection for the besieged population."

Some of the UNHCR's critics see in all this an erosion of the commitment to asylum for refugees — at the behest of the developed countries that supply the lion's share of the agency's \$1.3 billion budget.

"Sometimes its protection function is compromised by the need to accommodate the needs of the governmental funders," the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights, a New York-based agency, wrote in a key 1991 study of the UNHCR.

Refugee lawyer Arthur Helton, editor of the Lawyers' Committee report, said from New York: "Wealthy countries are engaged in various strategies to keep asylum-seekers from coming into their territory. There is concern about the direction this is leading the UNHCR. How much does it compromise asylum, an institution that is under a great deal of pressure?"

Ogata said her critics should be realistic and appreciate that Northern countries cannot absorb all the world's refugees and that often those refugees do not want to move anyway. And she said if the institution of asylum, which will always be needed in some cases, is to be maintained, the problem of abuse of the refugee system must be addressed.

She said: "Not all asylum seekers are refugees. There are maybe those who are moving to seek opportunities. There are abuses and it is the negative perception of refugees that I am determined to prevent. If you want to protect the institution of asylum, the abuses will have to be contained."

Such statements worry people like David Matas, pres-

To the Editor...

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Payment of bills
Sir, Each month residents of Dhaka are to pay bills for telephones, electricity, gas, and quarterly municipal taxes. But at present it is very inconvenient and time consuming to pay such bills. With a little imagination and goodwill the authorities of Telephone, DESA, Titas Gas, and the Municipal Corporation could make it convenient for their clients to pay the bills with ease. To cite an example let us take my case. I live in a flat at the Eastern Tower and there is a branch of Janata Bank within a few meters from the Tower. Known as Bangla Motor Branch. This branch collects electricity, telephone, gas and municipal tax bills. But I have to go to Agrani Bank and Janata Bank, Magh Bazar branch both quite a distance from the Tower to pay electricity and gas bills and to City Bank, Kawran Bazar to pay telephone bills. I can, of course, pay the municipal tax at the Janata Bank Bangla Motor Branch.

It would be convenient for me and the 150 residents, also other residents in the neighbourhood, if they could use the nearest Janata Bank branch as an "one stop" location to pay all the bills. It is not impossible to organise such a system given the will to appreciate the inconvenience of multitude of city dwellers. Think of single ladies, widows, retired persons who cannot afford the luxury of having servants, pedicabs and drivers to do the errand and have to do the chores, themselves.

If the aforementioned authorities wish to remove the inconvenience of their clients, I am sure they can do so. I am sure they know how to do it. However, for good order's sake, I would like to suggest the following:

1. Designate the bank's name but let the subscriber or the consumer choose the branch of his convenience and notify the concerned authorities.
2. On being notified the name of the bank/branch the respective authorities should

P.G. Muhammad
Eastern Towers, New Iskaton, Dhaka

The Lakes of Dhaka

Sir, I am immensely pleased to read the article under the heading "The Lakes of Dhaka" by Shah A M S Kibria in The Daily Star recently. In the article, Mr Kibria has properly highlighted the sad state of the lakes of Dhaka. Man cannot lead a decent and happy life only by wearing costly clothes and taking rich food. For a better and happier life, we need recreation too. It is a matter of sorrow that Dhaka city lacks adequate number of recreational places for its nearly seventy lac people. For recreations, Dhaka city has only two or three parks and similar number of lakes.

But these parks are also not more safe for visitors on account of concentration of anti-social elements there. People, particularly who are accompanied by females, while visiting Ramma Park or Suhrawardy Uddyan, suffer greatly from a sense of insecurity. Dhaka city's parks need to be beautified by planting more trees and plants and creating or maintaining lakes and of course strengthening the security arrangement there to ensure safety of the visitors.

There are other means for entertainment for us such as TV, video, cinema and some indoor games. But for that you have to stay indoors. And naturally, by staying in the house for hours together, day after day, we would feel boring and dull. In such a situation, we desire to stroll in a park or by a lake. Sadly, our such wish cannot be fulfilled now due to present sorrowful state of the parks and lakes of Dhaka city.

A look into ego play

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It can at best be described as a fad which has taken the fancy of our young generation.

In fact, pride of ancestry, heritage etc are not the manifestations of 'ego' but of vanity. 'Ego' is something every conscious and normal man is born with. Normal manifestations of 'ego' are dignity and self-respect. However, a person with an 'inflated ego' or an egotist in the real sense of term is one who thinks that the world moves around him. For him it is always "I" who did this or did that. None else matters. Neither his ancestry nor his heritage. They are the ones who create all sorts of problems, and perhaps mainly for themselves. They are more to be pitied than censured.

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