

Right to Speak

It is welcome news that the city will soon arrange for four particular venues for public meetings, thanks to the BNP government. Already three places have been selected by the four-member sub-committee assigned to do so by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Public Works. The report on Home Minister Abdul Matin Chowdhury's answer to the call attention notice for a ban on meetings, rallies and processions on roads and in commercial areas, carried in this paper on Thursday, is however silent on the rest one. This paper has long been pleading for such an arrangement to avoid untold sufferings for the city commuters with both regular and urgent duties and business to perform. We are glad that our concern and suggestions have been able to elicit a favourable response.

No doubt, this is a good thing ever to happen to the city in particular and the nation in general, which is known for protesting even the slightest wrong and undesirable developments. The government will have a legitimate claim to the credit of facilitating the venting of people's feelings on any issues they like. Setting aside places for meeting and rallies does not mean that the administration is going to concede to demands for any special rights; rather it seeks to create the facilities for holding such public affairs in a more orderly and disciplined manner. This is where a balance is struck between the rights enjoyed by the citizens of a democratic dispensation and the responsibilities they owe to the state and government.

Conflicting interests most of the time stand in the way of holding peaceful demonstrations by different contentious parties and groups. If the parties involved do not know where to draw the line, clashes are unavoidable, leading to such a mess where the democratic values are left in tatters. With flourishing democracy, the way of protests ought to be quite civilised and the accountability and transparency of the government have to be equally responsive to the requirements of the people.

The home minister has been very candid to admit that holding rallies and public meetings and bringing out processions are a democratic right. The underlying meaning is that his government is not going to endorse the content of the call attention notice moved by a member of the treasury bench. Fine. But recent experience tells us of a different story. Meetings of a certain organisation, and even a political party, were not allowed at different venues. The police demonstrated ample brutal power. In another case, a particular party is subjected to all sorts of maltreatment and harassment every time it tried to hold a meeting or a rally.

Rallies cannot be held and processions brought out in areas only earmarked for the purpose; they ought to be targeted for driving a point or two home and therefore must choose venues where the concerned men in power sit. The question of banning such practices does not arise. What is however of utmost importance is that such public protests do not interfere with the normal commercial transactions. So the protestors cannot be unruly anymore to disrupt such activities as much as the government cannot be repressive too. Now to maintain order and discipline, a few physical facilities along with the meeting venues must be created: public toilet — the lack of which is a problem itself for the entire city — tops the order. Maintenance of the meeting place has also to be ensured as part of the whole exercise. One other point that deserves attention is the location of the venues: the more distant they are from educational institutions the better. However, if exceptions illustrate the rule, then we must recommend one. To commemorate the March 7th speech, a take-off point in the struggle for independent Bangladesh, by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at Suhrawardy Uddyan, it is incumbent upon us to rededicate a part of the park for public meetings.

Lift the Arms Embargo

We would like to express our satisfaction at the Declaration adopted by the Vienna Human Rights Conference denouncing the atrocities committed in Bosnia and asking for lifting of the arms embargo. However, our satisfaction is considerably lessened by the fact that along with the sole negative vote of Russia, there were 54 abstentions to the resolution. We think it is a matter of shame that when the US is projecting Human Rights as one of its major thrust areas in the post-Cold War era, it should chose to remain aloof on a resolution as fundamental as the human rights violations in Bosnia. The role of the 12-member European Community is equally regrettable. Who can deny the nature and the extent of violations of human rights in Bosnia? A whole people is facing extinction only because they follow a different religion — Islam. They are being systematically exterminated, and the so-called votaries of human rights refrain from supporting as simple and harmless a thing as a declaration in a UN meeting. The duplicity and double standard of the western countries have seldom been so thoroughly revealed as in the Bosnian case.

The argument that the declaration violated the "gentlemen's agreement" that no case of individual countries would be raised, is a misreading of the Bosnian case at best, or a dispicable attempt to sweep under the carpet a genocide and racist and religious murder of a people at worse. The crime committed against the Bosnian people is not an affair of a single country. It is a global issue of the most fundamental type, because it strikes at the very root of all the values and principles that we hold high as the product our civilization. We fully share the view expressed by the Pakistani delegate, Agha Shahi, that "It is inconceivable that this world conference should end without clearly pronouncing its position on the tragic situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina."

We would like to commend the role of Bangladesh in this crucial conference, especially that of Foreign Minister Mostafizur Rahman, in taking a strong position against the partitioning of Bosnia into three miri-states. Our strong support for the lifting of arms embargo against the Muslims of Bosnia is a principled stand which reflects the wishes of the people of Bosnia.

However, a point needs to be made here is that the Vienna Declaration may constitute a moral and psychological victory for the suffering people of Bosnia-Herzegovina. But without arms and other international help, such victories will be hollow and meaningless. Bangladesh should now employ all the diplomatic energy it can muster, and work with other OIC countries and see to it that the arms embargo is lifted as soon as possible.

COVERING a total area of slightly less than 4 million square kilometres and a population of around 60 million, the central Asian Republics stretch nearly 5,000 kilometres from west to east and 3,000 kilometres from north to south. All the Republics are land-locked countries, bounded in the north by the Russian Federation, in the east by China, in the south by Afghanistan and Iran and in the west by Syria and Turkey. The existing transport system is quite extensive but developed in such a way that road and rail connections are pointed to the north, leading to Russia, since under USSR all linkages were within the vast Soviet Empire.

Although connections to neighbouring countries like Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and China, both road and rail, do exist, they need to be refurbished and strengthened as a part of infrastructure development for expanding trade and economic cooperation with Asia and the Pacific region in general and neighbouring Muslim countries in particular. International airlines are available in 3 out of 6 Republics but domestic flights are available as a part of the former Aeroflot network.

For Bangladesh, emergence of central Asia should imply prospects for new found trade opportunities. The sixty million people of the six countries all drink tea. Therefore a sizeable market for our tea can be secured against which we may import cotton that we need for

Central Asia: What it Means for Us — II  
A New Zone to Boost Our Export

our present and future spinning mills. In fact, a steady and assured supply of raw cotton from central Asia would constitute the sound basis for expanding the textile industry of Bangladesh since demand for fabrics would not be a serious problem. The garment industry imported Tk six billion worth of fabrics in the last fiscal year. The rapidly expanding export oriented knitwear industry is also emerging as an enormous consumer of cotton yarn. Since Bangladesh is only a marginal producer of raw cotton, assured sources of imports are of prime importance for rapidly enlarging the textile industry including garment making.

Related to central Asian cotton, there is also the potential for creating new markets for our jute bags which constitute one of the best materials for packing cotton. One ton of jute bags will be required, on the average, for packing every 100 tons of cotton. Thus central Asia has the potential to absorb the entire production of 2 to 3 standard size jute mills of Bangladesh.

Jute is also ideal as a wool-pack. We can also buy quality wool from central Asia provided spinning mills for the purpose are set up to supply the emerging woolen knitwear industry of the country which given the high intensity of

labour required, have the potential for very quick expansion. Hand-woven sweaters and pullovers are expensive items all over Europe and North America. Thus we should vigorously pursue possibilities of exporting our jute goods against purchase of both cotton and wool.

Leather goods, particularly shoes, can be very important export item from Bangladesh to all the six central Asian

Republics. It should easily be a 100 million dollar market provided our businessmen are aggressive enough to quickly establish a foothold without any further delay. The ban on the export of hides and skin should boost the leather tanning industry. The next step ought to be shoe manufacturing provided market is assured. Central Asia is the answer in this respect.

It may be noted that report of jute goods is facing declining world demand; while new markets are awaiting to be developed in central Asia. Similarly export of tea have been facing difficulties during the last two years precisely be-

cause demand from former USSR have markedly fallen. What is necessary is vigorous promotional work and new marketing arrangements. Aggressive salesmanship is in order. Shiploads of tea and jute can be dispatched for central Asia through ports in Iran and Turkey while the same ships can bring back cotton and wool through a bold new type of counter-trade arrangement. The markets are still to be de-

veloped; and for the first time, it is an unique opportunity to secure good business in locations hitherto unknown. It must be remembered that pioneers who succeed now would ultimately establish huge business conglomerates that should eventually contribute very significantly to the economic growth of the nation. Traders' profits of today are the industrial capital of tomorrow. It had never been through huge borrowings alone that private sector industrialization was feasible; role of equity is seemingly much more important which should come from expanding international trade.

Apart from cotton, central Asia can also be the source of crude oil that we import on a regular basis. Presently, we buy it from Middle-East. If it is a better deal, since we are able to sell our jute and tea to those countries, there is no reason why we should not diversify our sources of oil imports. Once we are successful in establishing a niche for our traditional exports against imports of commodities from central Asia, cotton and crude oil in particular, we must not lose any time to promote the sale of non-traditional export items, for example, pulp, paper and newsprint.

The major problem that arises is the shortage of dollars in the transitional economies of central Asia to give effect to

such transactions. Hence at least for the time being, barter or counter trade arrangements are necessary. Still, dollars are required to make the final settlement of payments since the values, for both export and import at any given point in time are not going to be exactly the same.

This is where World Bank/IMF can render the required assistance by extending a foreign exchange line of credit to the Republics to buy our goods and services against purchase of their cotton, wool and crude oil, among others. However for central Asia, organizing exports to new directions through ports in Turkey and Iran might take some time while from our stocks of jute goods and accumulated tea in the Chittagong warehouses, dispatch can be arranged very easily. This is where short term credits are required. In fact, given our not so uncomfortable foreign exchange position at present, export credits for the purpose can also be extended out of our own resources.

In spite of being a least developed country, let us be bold. Since central Asia is a golden opportunity which is definitely not going to last for long, let us try to make hay while the sun shines. However, this should be an export promotion programme with a difference: let the Government do the least so that it can do much more for export growth. Its role should be truly that of a catalyst; if more or less, the desired results would not be forthcoming.

**WINDOW ON ASIA**  
Shahed Latif

INTERNATIONAL DAY AGAINST DRUG ABUSE

"Yes to Life — No to Drugs"

by M Enamul Haq

Bangladesh has become a major transit country for drug trafficking. It has natural border with Myanmar which has only aggravated the situation being a major source of heroin. Its easy access to sea, absence of modern and advanced detection method at the ports and airports, modern and above all limited means to assess the impact of this problem has made the country all the more vulnerable to transit traffic of drugs destined for Europe and America.

In the past the problem of drug abuse in Bangladesh had been of a relatively insignificant nature. Ours is a predominantly Muslim society and Islamic values and traditions and strong family ties so far have helped us to contain drug abuse. But if seizures are any indicator of the growing seriousness of the situation then in recent years hauls of huge quantities of narcotic drugs and contraband cigarettes at the major entry points attest to the escalating rate of consumption. According to some estimates there are more than one lakh drug dependents in the capital city of Dhaka.

Narcotics Control

In recognition of this problem which has started to threaten the social fabric and security of our country, the government has taken a series of administrative measures to deal with addiction. One of the most significant steps taken was to form a high powered national Narcotics Control Board to frame policies regarding drug related problems. It is headed by a Chairman nominated by the Government. All concerned Ministers and five leading citizens (social worker, philanthropist, intellectual, journalist and physician/psychiatrist) nominated by the Government are members of this Board alongwith two officials (Secretary, Ministry of

Law and the Director General of the Department of Narcotics Control). All previous laws have been repealed and a new law called 'The Narcotics Control Act 1990' has been enacted with effect from 2nd January, 1990. Moreover, in pursuance of article 17 of the Single Convention of 1961 Bangladesh has set up a special administrative unit, namely the Department of Narcotics Control. It works as the focal point of all anti-drug activities; harsh penalties including capital punishment for drug offences has been introduced by the government. Offences under the law are cognizable as well as non-bailable. Courts have been empowered to bar transfer of properties by persons under investigation or under trial for drug offences. Provisions have been made for setting up of treatment centres for addicts. All these things come to show that anti-drug movement has gained momentum also in Bangladesh. Demand reduction has been known to be an effective and desirable method to control drug abuse all over the world and preventive education is the most effective way to reduce demand. In this respect the mass-media is being used to heighten national awareness, to inform and educate the people. The drug menace has struck hard within the weakest sections of the people. Most of the addicts are illiterate and they live in the slum areas of the capital. Because they are illiterate, in most cases the parents and the addicts remain quite ignorant of the harmful effect of drug. As a result quite unknowingly they step into the world of self-destruction.

Public awareness campaign about the dangerous effect of drug consumption is being carried out in the form of radio and television special programmes on the control of

drug abuse and publication of poster, brochures, leaflets, stickers, holding of seminars and symposium by the Government, private or non-governmental initiative. There is a programme to include the drug prevention education in the formal education system of the country. And perhaps the general public ought to know about the prevailing situation worldwide in general and Bangladesh in particular. Ignorance is bliss but not knowing the disease one cannot motivate the others. The following table may help the general mass to know about the present trend of drug addiction in our homeland:

Survey of 20 drug addicts through interview:

SEX	(Approximate)
Male	80 Percent
Female	20 Percent
AGE	
14-18	10 Percent
19-25	20 Percent
26-35	56 Percent
36-50	15 Percent
MARITAL STATUS	
Married	30 Percent
Unmarried	50 Percent
Divorced/Separate	20 Percent
EDUCATION	
Illiterate	40 Percent
S.S.C	25 Percent
Graduate	20 Percent
Higher Education	15 Percent
OCCUPATION	
Unemployed	40 Percent
Student	30 Percent
Business	10 Percent
Professional	20 Percent
REASONS GIVEN AS CAUSE OF FIRST DRUG	
Not known	10 Percent
Curiosity	25 Percent
Bad companion	45 Percent
Frustration	20 Percent

The 17th special session of the General Assembly held from 20 to 23rd February, 1990 in New York proposed of a Decade Against Drug Abuse starting from 1991. The idea appealed to all members and a

global programme was adopted. Accordingly, the Government of Bangladesh has taken different programmes to observe the decade in a befitting manner. Then Acting President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed released a set of commemorative stamps and a first day cover marking the beginning of the UN decade against drug abuse. Moreover, the Department of Narcotics Control published posters, stickers and different non-governmental organizations also took various programmes on the occasion. It is our confirmed belief that through joint endeavors we shall be able to eradicate the evil of drug abuse. The future of all mankind is at stake, so we must find a way. Our commitment should be to wipe out this scourge from the face of the earth before the decade is over.

Reducing Supply

Another meaningful approach to control drug abuse is to reduce the supply of illicit drugs through enforcement of measure. But the absence of technical expertise, inadequate fund, lack of know-how to train relevant personnel add to our difficulties. Thus we need to share experience, knowledge and expertise. In this respect some foreign bodies have come to our help. Smoking is another addiction which is creating problem for many of us. Some view it as an innocent addiction. But some recent private surveys show that drug addicts go on taking drugs in smoking media in front of everybody without raising any suspicion. So mass awareness should also be created against smoking.

We are to day engaged in a universal war against what threatens to erode our long-cherished values and which has no respect for national

boundaries, no discrimination as to race, religion, age or gender, no limit to time.

There is no denying the fact that drug abuse problem also has a development context. We cannot succeed to reduce poverty, ensure jobs and enhance health and literacy of the people unless we control drug abuse. In this respect initiatives from all concerned specially the highest political levels will be highly helpful. Bangladesh's commitment to eliminate it from our society has been demonstrated by its becoming a signatory country to all the three UN Conventions of 1961, 1971 and 1988. Moreover, we have co-ordinated national policies with those of others in the world.

All facts indicate that the battle against drug abuse and trafficking is, going to be grimmer in the coming years. Because the drug barons who control this business all over the world, are ruthless criminals who will leave no stones unturned to remove the hurdles that lie across their path. But being fully aware how difficult it is going to be, we should be all the more determined and committed to overcome the crisis. We have the will, so we must also find the way. It is not a simple problem with simple solutions. Jailing drug pushers, treating drug abusers, educating school children, restricting doses, legalising drugs etc. all these approaches have their own merit under specific circumstances. However, lasting solutions must come not only from our society and its inter actions, but also and more fundamentally from us providing our children with some understanding and sympathy and working with them to develop a value system that will bring the greatest good to this life and prepare them for the life to come. "Yes to Life — No to Drugs."

The writer is ex-Inspector General of Police and Ex-Director General, Department of Narcotics Control, Bangladesh.

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.

Moribund budget

Sir, Citing quotations from fourteenth century philosopher Ibn Khaldun and eighteenth century British statesman and orator Edmund Burke, our seasoned Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman presented the national budget for the year 1993-1994 with a deficit of Taka 7617 crore.

After independence, we started with our first revenue budget amounting to Tk 218.43 crore and a development budget of Tk 318.32 crore. The following year in 1973-74 our revenue earning amounted to Tk 374.32 crore, revenue expenditure amounted to Tk 295.30 crore and development expenditure stood at Tk 449 crore. Today, for the year 1993-1994 the revenue receipts has been estimated at Tk 12335 crore, revenue expenditure has been set at Taka 9300 crore and the development budget has been fixed at

Tk 9750 crore. Despite vast changes in the budget figures of 1973-74 and 1993-94 the standard of life and the sufferings of the majority of the people of our country remain more or less the same as those were two decades ago.

It is bitter but true that the lion's share of our revenue and development budget and also the foreign aid we receive are being spent on payment of pay and allowances and for providing facilities to about 16.7 lakh government servants, employees of the public sector corporations, members of the armed forces, police, government teachers and public leaders. The left out paltry amount of money of the budget goes to the people. Some charlatans and critics very often change their faces as and when situation demands, to safeguard their personal interest.

In fact there is no equitable and justifiable distribution of

our national wealth and public money. It is alleged that there is a large-scale wastage, misuse and squandering of public money. In the name of nationalisation, denationalisation and market economy, from time to time, our poverty stricken people are being bereft of their due share and rights.

What benefit do the people derive from the national budget? Round the year the prices, the tariff charges of different goods and commodities and services both in the private sector and in the public sector continue to increase unabated. We never find any improvement and change in the condition of the people before or after the announcement of the national budget. We, however, congratulate the Finance Minister for not imposing any new taxes for the financial year 1993-94.

We fail to understand the aims, objectives, directives and achievements of our national budget. Is it meant only for the government servants and a few persons connected with the affairs of running the state? Is it not meant for the people?

A group of persons are always benefited by the announcement of the national budget. They were new suits, sarees, purchase more luxury items, cars and make pleasant

trips to foreign countries. The differences between the rich and the poor keep on widening day by day.

We demand drastic and revolutionary changes in our national budget to make it more people oriented. For the year 1993-94 we demand an abrupt cut of Tk 5000.00 crore in our revenue expenditure the amount of which may be re-appropriated and spent on establishment of new mills and factories and construction of residential houses for the common people. Mills and factories would generate employment to our youth force and the residential houses may be sold to the common people on easy instalments.

If we could carry the heavy load of our civil administration within an expenditure of Tk 374.32 crore in the year 1973-74 there is no reason why we can't run the civil administration of our country with Tk 3510.00 crore in the year 1993-94.

We would request our Members of the Parliament to kindly help Bangladesh stand on its own feet and to alleviate the sufferings of the poor people of this virtually poor country.

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Criminalisation of politics

Sir, Recently a unique seminar on 'Criminalisation of Politics' was held in New Delhi which was organised by the government itself. Eminent politicians, economists, writers and journalists etc participated in the seminar and they unanimously reached at a conclusion that at least four per cent of elected representatives in India are estimated to be criminals or connected with the criminals. Interestingly, the politicians, economists, writers and journalists were the first to admit that criminals have entered politics.

They further agreed that almost all political parties and groups resort in varying degrees to such methods. The Indians need not be alarmed at this rate. The old proverb 'one fish is sufficient to spoil the whole pond' is not applicable everywhere. There is a country just next door to India where perhaps only four per cent elected members or politicians are not associated with criminals or crimes.

At home, although we are fairly advanced in organising seminars in the metropolitan city of Dhaka, thanks goodness we have not as yet organised any seminar on criminalisation of politics. I'm afraid it's the

apprehension of being branded as criminals has deterred the local politicians, economists, writers and journalists etc from holding such decay seminars.

TAILPIECE: A man once approached the manager of a movie house in a north African city and asked him to bring out his wife who was watching a film inside the hall with his illicit lover. The manager stopped the show; switched off the light and requested the woman concerned to leave the house in the darkness. After two minutes the light was again switched on. To the utter surprise of the audience and the cinema management, it was found that out of about a hundred female movie-goers, only four or five were left inside the hall!

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Martyrs

Sir, Hats off to Mr Mahfuz Anam for his courage and commentary and shame on Col (Retd) Akbar for trying to create new history by digging up the martyrs of our great War of Independence. What more can one say to someone who cannot see the forest because of the trees? May the souls of those who embraced martyrdom for our freedom rest in peace.  
Arnold C. Gomes  
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