Dhaka, Friday, July 9, 1993

A Chilling Scenario

Use, better say abuse, of polythene has reached such a dreadful level that it now poses a serious threat to the physical environment of the capital city. It is not that the revelation made at an open discussion session organised by the Environment and Social Development Organisation (ESDO), a non-government body, is new or was totally unexpected, for informed people have all through been apprehensive of such a disastrous consequence following the indiscriminate use of polythene bags and sheets. There were even attempts by environmentalists to convince the government of the harmful impacts of the substance on the city's - and the country's in general - environment and thus force it to ban production of this non-perishable pollutant.

This time the report published in this paper yesterday is pronouncedly specific about the consequence and has advanced some chilling figures in support of the claim. First of all, the half a million polythene bags thrown away by the city's inhabitants everyday are not to be meant for safe collection by the municipality's garbage vans. The filth collectors, according to the ESDO, have at the most only 20 per cent share of the rejected polythene bags. The rest find their way into the city's drains and are responsible for overflowing of sewage. The second harmful impact is directly related to health in that, prolonged use of foods in polythene bags has the ominous possibility of causing cancer apart from some skin diseases. The third consequence is the growth of certain types of bacteria, thanks to the villainous polythene, that prove highly damaging for cultivation of paddy, wheat and mustard.

The ESDO paper has concentrated on just Dhaka City and there is no reason why the situation will be any different in other cities and towns. The use of the material in villages may not be as wide as it is in the urban centres but enough to contaminate the arable soil of this small country.

Then the report has been silent on the nonperishable quality of polythene and the havoc it will wreak over hundreds of years. The fact that the polythene, if the current rate of use continues, will most unfavourably mix with soil to leave no room for farming seems to be the greatest of all threats. Looking at that frightening scenario, the apt simile, to our mind, is that we are creating a Frankenstein we will be unable to handle. It is obviously not a problem with the cities or towns either. There are more ways than one by which the dumped polythene bags get carried away into places at a great distance.

Surprisingly though people who are aware of the deleterious impacts of the substance show hardly any qualms about using it and thus they also become a party to this malpractice. The government is equally insensitive to the issue and has failed to enforce any legislative measure to curb the manufacture of the harmful bags. No less than 171 factories are manufacturing polythene bags with permission from the government and another 200 are operating illegally in the city. Other cities are supposed to have quite a big share of the venture. So the combined manufacturing capacity per day can give us an idea of the magnitude of the problem. We believe the figure will be in the neighbourhood of millions.

So the question that begs for a straight and simple answer is: what stands in the way of bringing an end to polythene bag's manufacture? Trade lobby — no matter how strong it may be should not be allowed to jeopardise the nation's future. Particularly when we have a most versatile material like jute to replace it in a most environment-friendly way, we have no reason to lose a moment to pronounce the death sentence on polythene. If we fail to take the right decision now, our future generation will surely have reasons to hold us responsible for the lapse.

Good News for Hanoi

With Washington relaxing its tight restrictions on co-operation with Vietnam, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has offered a substantial financial assistance to Hanoi, amounting to over \$150 million, thus easing the socialist country's balance of payment situation. This, we are sure, will pave the way for the entry of other agencies of the United Nations into the development scene of this hard-pressed but forward-looking former Indo-China state.

Meanwhile, Hanoi has licensed several big US firms, including banks, to open their offices in Vietnam. Even IBM, a giant in the computer business, is waiting on the sideline to set up its operation.

These US-based companies may have to wait for months before they start operating their business, whether it is in the banking sector or the manufacturing field. They can do so only after the economic embargo maintained by Washington against Vietnam since 1964 is lifted. With the Clinton administration taking a more flexible position on the US soldiers "Missing in Action" (MIA) during the war - an issue on which successive administrations in US had been unduly awkward — the embargo appears on the way out. However, a more important reason for an early end of the embargo is provided by the pressure from US companies which are losing out to their counterparts from Australia, Canada, Japan and Thailand which have started picking up good projects, especially in the field of joint ventures, within the framework of the socialist country's increasingly liberal market-oriented economy. Washington cannot afford to wait too long when it badly needs to balance its trade deficits with China, Japan and South Korea with a possible surplus with Vietnam.

Hanoi is calling the shots. This is because this socialist country whose rigid centralised planning had once kept the nation in economic stalemate, now sees not only the importance of pragmatism but also the need to move fast. This is where

Hanoi offers a lesson for Dhaka.

We welcome the decision of Bangladesh to set up a resident diplomatic mission in Vietnam. At the political level, there is plenty of room for cooperation between the two countries. However, we believe, the focus should be on economic exchanges. We can certainly see Vietnam as part of our export market for some our consumer goods. At the same time, we can examine the prospects of entering Vietnam's housing and construction industry. Hanoi may well be a competitor of Dhaka in attracting foreign investment. However, there are areas where the competition can be turned into partnership, to the benefit of both sides.

Interview with Shahi Imam — Imam Bukhari — of Jama Masjid, Delhi "Every Muslim Youth is Now a Suppressed Volcano"

The Shahi Imam exhibited a by Mahfuz Anam

MAM Bukhari, the Shahi Imam of the Jama Masjid of Delhi, has emerged as a very important player in Indian politics, especially since 1977. At that time he played a key role in mobilizing the Indian Muslim vote against the Congress government of Indira Gandhi. A virtual ruler of the walled ctty of Delhi, he proudly proclaims "Here, what I say goes". After the destruction of the Babri mosque, the Shahi Imam has emerged as perhaps the most powerful represe-ntative of the

hardline Muslim leaders. His son, Naib Imam, has recently been subjected to severe press criticism both for his considerable wealth and for his alleged role in fomenting riots in some parts of Delhi. Fallout from that controversy has also touched the Shahi Imam, who has recently distanced himself

from his son. Speaking to this writer, in the reception room located on one side of the magnificent Jama Masjid, the Shahi Imam was clear, quick, and articulate in his answers. Interrupting the interview, the Shahi Imam, spoke over the public address system (placed on all sides of the masjid) giving out, what he termed was his 'Elan' against the Delhi police's directive of closing all shops in the old Delhi by 8 pm. He announced that due to Eid, the shops will remain open till 10.30 pm, and police dare not try to stop Muslim Eid shoppers. After making his 'Elan', he turned to me saying *My announcement will be reported by the journalists and by the police informants to all necessary quarters. They will act accordingly. I do not send out any letter or communication. I say it through this mike, and all concerned come to know of

He was obviously satisfied with this display of his power to a foreign journalist.

very impressive sense of punctuality which I did not quite expect. My interview was at 10 am. I arrived at 9- 45. After the usual pleasantries. I shot my first question. Interrupting me he said, "We will begin at 10 am."

The Daily Star (DS): What do you think is happening to

the Indian Muslims? Imam Bukhari (B): My country is in a very bad shape. sometimes feel that my country will be broken into pieces. You see a country is not just the soil on which it stands. It is just this name of the structures or the physical features of the land. A country is made of the people who inhabit it. If a country does not live in the heart of its people, then where is the existence of that coun-

Today the situation is that we have a Prime Minister and a government that says that communalism must be eradicated, communalists must be defeated. He tells the people not to be misled by communal propaganda. But the real situation is that we have a Prime Minister with whom communal organisations and its lead ers are linked. It is now clearly proven that there was the 'hand of the Prime Minister' in the 'shahadat' (demise) of the Babri masjid.

DS - Are you totally convinced of this fact, I mean the involvement of the Prime Minister?

B —There is not an iota of doubt in our minds on that score. You ask any 10 year old Muslim boy, and he will tell you the same thing.

DS — Asking a 10-year boy, is not the best way of finding out a fact.

B — This indicates the popular feeling. Whatever the Congress government did after (The translation from Urdu is the author's)

the demolition of the mosque, the dissolution of the UP government, and the governments of four other states, they were all eye wash. Done only to please the Muslim countries and prevent retaliatory actions from them. To show the Muslim world that India was taking stern action action against those who destroyed the mosque. It was only for external consumption.

then why were similar measures not taken to save the mosque?

DS — You believe that the Rao government could have saved the mosque if it wanted

B - Absolutely. It the Rao government really wanted to, it could have protected the Babri mosque, and prevented its demolition. So the Congress and Mr Rao are essentially

DS - You believe that the Rao government could have saved the mosque if it wanted to?

B — Absolutely. It the Rao government really wanted to, it could have protected the Babri mosque, and prevented its demolition. So the Congress and Mr Rao are essentially playing a double-game. He tells Muslims that everything will be done to protect their places of worship, and then he tells the Hindus that they can have their temple if they want it.

DS — But the government also banned the VHP, the RSS and other parties. All this was "eye wash"?

B - The government's banning VHP and the RSS were a sham. Do you think there was any let up in their activities? The VHP and RSS workers moved around as freely as you and I. You know the BJP rally on 15 March, which the Congress government prevented from being held. So much state force was brought together to foil that rally. If there was such determination to prevent these people from holding a rally,

playing a double-game. He tells Muslims that everything will be done to protect their places of worship, and then he tells the Hindus that they can have their temple if they want it. DS - What is the present

B — The situation now is that the open sword of communal forces are hanging over our heads. There is no knowing what these people will do, and when. But we Muslims are not afraid of all these eventualities. We are not despondent, nor are we impatient. We believe that after every night there is a bright and beautiful

dawn. There is no doubt that for Indian Muslims, the present moment is comparable to

the darkness of the night. The Muslims in India are now 15 crore (150 million) We are a big community and we are waiting for our morning

to come. DS - What should the Muslims now do?

B - First we have to follow the path of Allah. We have to strengthen our Iman (Faith). We have to mould our characters in the proper line, under proper guidance. We believe that when we are able to model our lives in accordance to the dictates of Allah and our Rasul Hazrat Mohammed (SM) then our dark days will turn into bright mornings full of light and beauty. So the task is to do things that please Allah and to desist from doing things that displease Him. Do you know what Juwala

Mukhi is? DS - Not really. (My compassion translates it, as vol-

B - Volcano. There is fire inside a volcano. Today Muslims are restrained. We are silent, and we are

keeping our mouths shut. We are worried and anxious. We are not saying anything at this stage. We are watching the events very carefully. But in our hearts, a volcano is burning. When a volcano bursts, it destroys everything in its path. That is our condition today. We, the Muslims of India, are like a suppressed volcano, calm on the surface, but burning inside. We cannot say when this fire will burst out. Every Muslim youth is now a suppressed volcano.

DS - Why is it so? B — Our women have been raped, our houses burnt and invaded.

DS - Are you referring to

Kashmir, or the whole of India. B - Throughout India, wherever there are Hindu-Muslim rlots.

These crimes are not only committed by the Hindu fanatics. Police, security forces have also been known to do the same thing. Fortunes of rich

Muslims have been looted right in front of the police. About Kashmir, the less said the better. The oppression that is going on in Kashmir, has very few parallels in the

Article 370 of the Indian Constitution has been destroyed by these people. It exists today only in the statute books, not in real life. If the Indian government implemented Article 370 with sincerity and love for the Muslims, then Kashmir would not have become what it has become today. Crores of Rupees were given by the government for the Kashmiri people. But the corrupt state government ate it all up. Nobody was asked what was happening to the people of Kashmir. Was the money going to the people, or to the politicians' pockets?

Today, we do not trust this government and this Prime Minister anymore.

DS - Would you like to tell us, how you see the immediate future, how events are likely to unfold?

B - These are very uncertain times. We are suffering very much. A mistake now, can cause tremendous damage. So wot not like to speculate. We are observing things, and have adopted the policy of 'wait and see'. I do not like to say anything more.

DS - Thank you for your

B - Thank you. (Tomorrow: Interview with

M. J. Akbar, author and journalist)

Immigrant Workers

Complex Scenario Poses a Dilemma for Japan apartments to foreigners. With mitted by foreign workers." by S Y Bakht

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

APAN is unlikely to allow the entry of unskilled foreign workers in the near future, despite a perceived need, expressed by officials and businessmen alike, for them in the country's labour market.

The primary reason for the official reluctance to allow the entry of unskilled foreign workers is the fear of opening the "flood-gates" to thousands of potential job-seekers from developing Asian countries and the related high social costs involved.

The issue of letting immigrant workers into Japan is still being debated and differences of opinion, even among officials, exists. The question was pushed to the forefront after large numbers of undocumented foreign workers, including a sizeable number from Bangladesh, began entering the labour-scarce country during the economic boom years of the

late 80s. The influx of "illegal" workers was unexpected and the Japanese immigration system was caught somewhat unawares. The illegal entry of foreign workers into the lower-end of the Japanese labour market mainly presented two sets of problems: firstly, problems arising out of cultural differences and the pressure placed on the social infrastructure.

On the other hand, the illegal workers already in Japan are also facing problems related to basic human rights-- medical treatment, housing and other areas -- while some are also being discriminated against by their employers, particularly now that there is an ongoing economic recession in the country.

To trace the various perceptions and needs of the Japanese labour market a visiting journalist like this writer must attempt to look into the implications surrounding the issue. With that end in view, this cor-

respondent, during a recent month-long stay in Japan as a Foreign Press Centre fellow, talked to officials of the ministry of labour, ministry of justice, which deals with immigration, with non-government voluntary agencies involved in helping illegal foreign workers and the undocumented workers, mostly Bangladeshi, them-

According to the Ministry of Justice, an estimated total of about 2,92,791 foreigners were illegally overstaying in Japan as of November last year. There were approximately 8,000 Bangladeshi nationals among them. However, actual figures of those illegally employed are hard to come by

"We do not have precise figures as we have no means to know exactly how many of them are employed illegally," pointed out Naotoshi Sugiuchi, director, general affairs division, at the

Immigration Bureau. Voluntary organisations however, place the number of undocumented workers in Japan to be much more higher. Motoko Yamagishi, of the Forum of Asian Immigrant Workers, placed the figure at well over half a million. "Many people enter with fake passports, so it is difficult to gauge the exact numbers from the

ministry figures," she said. Most of the undocumented workers in Japan are from the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Iran They are primarily employed in small and medium-sized companies involved in construction, manufacturing and in the service sector and vie for lowerlevel jobs, which Japanese

workers are reluctant to accept. What are the existing immigration regulations regarding foreign workers in Japan? Presently, the country only accepts workers with special skills and has no provisions to allow unskilled foreign workers to be

employed in Japan, according to the Immigration Bureau offi-However, a recent amendment made provisions to allow unskilled workers with Japanese ancestry, primarily those from Brazil, Peru and

> other Latin American countries, to legally enter the labour mar-"Japan also wishes to cooperate with the international community and actively receives trainees from developing countries, and since April this year we somewhat extended this system to include a techni-

cal internship programme,

As for the perceived need for

foreign workers in the Japanese

labour market, demographic

statistics reveal that as the

population growth rate de-

creases the percentage of older

people would sharply rise in

contrast to the young-age

According to official figures,

the ratio of job seckers and the

job offer situation turned to

1:02 in June '88, indicating for

the first time in nearly 14 years

that there were more job offers

than job seekers. The ratio in-

creased constantly since then

and stood at 1:41 in June '91.

Association, an affiliate of the

Immigration Bureau, pointed

out in a report published last

year that improved business

conditions in Japanese indus-

tries have generated a shortage

in labour force due to differ-

environment.

ences in working conditions and

force continues to exist because

"The shortage in the labour

Even the Japan Immigration

Sugjuchi added.

group.

of the difference in the size of companies and the recent change of way of thinking of employers. There are companies which compensate the shortage in the labour force by using foreign workers," the report acknowledged.

But the official response to the shortage and the corresponding need to allow entry of foreign workers into Japan seems to be one of extreme caution, particularly after the problems created by the existing foreign workers employed in the country.

Some social conflicts arise out of cultural differences, Sugiuchi said while pointing

out, as an example, that some

foreigners do not know how to

director of the Foreign Workers'

Affairs Division at the Ministry

of Labour, noted that, although

no investigations have been

carried out on the social effects

of hosting foreign workers, it is

generally held that it would

make it difficult for older people

to find jobs and would also have

an adverse effect on the coun-

health-care system.

try's housing, education and

workers in criminal activities

which are given wide coverage

in the media, are also making

the Japanese people more ap-

crease in the number of illegal

workers may come as a pres-

Immigration Bureau official.

"Some people also started to ex-

press their fear at the increase

in the number of crimes com-

sure on us," noted the

"There is a fear that the in-

prehensive about foreigners.

Involvement of some foreign

Hiroyoshi Hatanaka, deputy

use a public bath.

The undocumented foreign workers in Japan, on the other hand, are facing various job-

> According lizuka Noritaka, exccutive member of the Asian People's Friendship Society-(APFS), the main problems relate to discrimination by some employers: non-payment of salary, benefits, medical and disability compensation. Acknowledging that there

related and social problems.

may be some cases of mistreatment of foreign workers by the employers, the Labour Ministry official noted "the foreign workers feel hesitant and insecure to go to any public office when they are wronged". He pointed out that the

labour law in Japan is applicable to all workers regardless of nationality or even the legality of his or her stay and a Workmen Compensation Scheme administered by the Labour Office is also in place.

"Industrial accidents involving foreign workers are a major problem and the employers normally do not apply for the compensation scheme out of the fear of employing illegal workers," Noritaka said. Under the Immigration Act employers who hire undocumented foreign workers can be sentenced for upto three years imprisonment or fined as much as two million

The General Secretary of APFS, Md. Rizaul Islam, a Bangladeshi national residing in Tokyo for the past several years, noted that foreign workers in Japan also face problems in getting adequate medical treatment, as most are not covered under medical insurance provided by the employers while private insurance is prohibitively expensive.

Foreign workers, he added, also find it difficult to rent suitable housing as most landowners are reluctant to lease

over 800 members representing 12 countries, the Society handled 311 cases of foreign workers involving labour issues and another 25 needing medical treatment.

After receiving a complaint the APFS contacts the employer and urges him to redress the grievance of the employee and if that fails, Rizaul Islam said, the society employs lawyers and lodges complaints with the abour Office.

According to the Immigration Association report, the argument in favour of allowing unskilled foreign workers to enter the Japanese labour market includes countering the labour shortage, increased international contribution and cooperation by easing the unemployment problem of developing countries and the argument that positive acceptance of foreign nationals would help Japan attain "domestic" internationalisation in line with it's

growing global influence. The negative aspects of allowing foreign workers into Japan which are currently being put forward include the risk of dividing the labour market, unemployment problems during economic recessions, risk of preventing improvement in working conditions including wage levels for Japanese workers, adverse effect on modernizationand rationalization, burden social costs, social friction and possible increase in

For all these reason, the port goes on to recommend a detailed study of the problem. "This is an issue of the whole nation and is not limited to one company or other ... and it is necessary to reach a national consensus on this question."

crime rates.

The writer, a senior reporter of this paper, recently spent a month in Japan as a Foreign Press Centre Fellow.

Mr Clinton's Tomahawk at-

tack on Baghdad is yet another

proof that might is right. It

also reminds me of the wolf in

the story who decided to eat

the lamb on the pretext that it

spoiled the brook-water (false,

Baghdad" (June 29).

BTV's Parliament Round-up

Sir, The Parliament Roundup was one of the important features of BTV which has been abruptly stopped by it apparently on the ground of some disputes arisen between the government and the opposition parties. This is not the proper way of solving any dispute over reporting of the parliament proceedings by

For the TV viewers, it was a pretty good programme.

It was more entertaining than informative in a sense that it not only provided us the chance to see our representatives, who are hardly available in their constituencies, on mini screen but also enabled us to see them in interesting stances sometimes sitting improperly, laughing unnecessarily, shouting meaninglessly, making issues of non-issues and even sometimes fighting and presenting scene of a stunt

The BTV is requested to reintroduce this programme at the earliest. For many of us, it is a latenight entertainment which also induces sleep. K R Zakhmi

Khulna

Stranded Pakistanis

Sir, I highly appreciate the efforts initiated and undertaken by the government of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia with Myanmar and Indian governments for repatriation of Rohingyas and Chakmas as per agreements reached between them. The discussions held recently in Dhaka will also help to resolve border demarcation and other bilateral issues ensuring an atmosphere of mutual understanding in the region for the wel fare and improvement of the lot of common people.

But, at the same time, it really pinches my heart to see

that no initiative as yet has been taken so sincerely to start repatriation of 2.38 lakh Pakistanis stranded in Bangladesh and languishing in 66 dingy and shabby camps for the last 21 years despite sign ing of historic Joint Declaration by Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia at the end

of her very first official visit to

Pakistan on 12th August 1992.

Our issue is purely and absolutely humanitarian and settled one but vested quarters have politicised it for the sake of their selfish ends. There is no hindrance in the way of repatriation at all. What is required is the application of political will and courage by both governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh. I most humbly and sincerely appeal to Hon'ble Prime Minister of Bangladesh to take bold and decisive steps and start repatriation of stranded Pakistanis with same spirit and zeal as applied in case of Rohingyas and Chakmas to uphold and enhance the im-

age and prestige of her demo-

cratic government and the Joint Declaration signed in Islamabad.

Governments may come and go but agreements are respected and implemented and it is the international decorum of civilised nations to create confidence among people. I believe, one must not allow human consideration to be submerged by consideration of diplomatic advantage or political convenience. The lapse of time is undoubtedly adding gradually to our sufferings, problems and grievances. It has rightly been said, "A stitch in time saves nine."

M Nasim Khan Chief Patron SPGRC, Bangladesh.

Arabic language and accessibility

Sir, It is high time that we should know the meaning of some commonly used Arabic words. For instance in Arabic

'Mowla' means God 'Maulana' my God, as I am made to know.

However, many persons as a prefix to their name are using the word 'Maulana'. This tradition is only common in countries of the sub-continent, introduced during the British rule for reasons only known to them, but still acceptable to us all in the society.

I could gather from one Islamic scholar who have translated the Holy Koran both in verses and prose in Bangla that nowhere in the Holy Koran Allah addresses Prophet Mohammed (SM) with this word 'Maulana' Now, it's hardly understood

to what justification persons are using this word with their names. Somebody may please enlighten further.

Bangabandhu Avenue, Dhaka

Mohammed Mohiuddin

Playing the wolf Sir, Thank you very much

because the wolf was drinking upstream). It is not the way we want to see America act. No country should take to the absurd idea that it could police the entire world. And the borderline between the punisher and the punished is so very thin that

quite often the roles are reversed. Tomorrow's America may become today's Iraq - history has a pattern like this. Might is 'always right', but to be right it has to depend on so many other factors which America at the moment has, but which it might lose if the

Mohit Ul Alam Chittagong

for your editorial, "Attack on

man at the helm is playing the wolf of the story.