

Government Buckles under Pressure

The so-called agreement between the government and the SKOP is little more than giving in by the former under the threat of mass action. In none of the fundamental issues — like linkage of wage and productivity, national minimum wage, disinvestment, etc — the government could hold its own. Instead, it gave-in to every one of SKOP's demand, either at this very moment, or in the form of a promise to be implemented within six months. The accord is the clearest sign, till today, that our government has no stomach for tough and principled action, and would buckle in the face of persistent and organised pressure. Even though all indications were that the support base of the pressure group was on a down-slide. In an earlier editorial we had asked: whether or not national interest is a numbers game? Just because a large organised group should demand something, should they get it without adequate consideration as to whether, in the long run, it serves our national purpose, or is in line with the policies, to implement which the present government has been elected?

A core question has been raised by the Employers Association. Is wage fixation a 'public issue' or a fundamental aspect of the market economy? Is it to be decided in the streets with slogans, or across the table with facts? It is possible to hold the nation a hostage and force agreements from the government for a certain level of wage. But can the nation afford it? Who will pay for the new minimum wage for the nationalised sector of Tk. 950? There is yet no clear picture as to how much the just concluded agreement with SKOP will cost the taxpayers. Why is the government shy of taking the public into confidence? This paper suggested on more than one occasion, that the government should go on the TV, radio and tell the people what the SKOP's demand means in Taka terms, and what the government will have to do to raise that fund. Even the Tripartite Consultation Committee (TCC) is not fully aware of all the aspects of the agreement signed. Last minute agreements, signed — almost always — late in the night, gives all sorts of wrong signals to pressure groups as to the strength of the government to do what is right and necessary, and not succumb to populist slogans.

We feel that the government should do some homework on what really will make the economy grow. The conclusion likely to be is that it is new investment and the consequent generation of new jobs. Who makes that investment? Globally, the lesson is, the private sector. Labour is an essential element in the process of production, and we are all in favour of it getting its due share of the "pie". But the main thrust of the moment is to make that pie bigger so that more and more people can have a share of it. But then, will such agreements, as the one signed with SKOP, encourage the private sector — both domestic and foreign — to invest here?

While signing the latest agreement, the government did not raise any question as to what these trade unions are willing to do in return. Is there any commitment on their part for higher productivity, wage-freeze till we make adequate profit, and the like? On the contrary, it is the government that has made further promises of an increment in six months and also to work towards a national minimum wage within the same time-frame. There is also the promise of denationalising government units only with everyone's consent.

Now that the agreement has been signed, the legality of which is questionable since it was not done with any registered trade union or the CBAs, the government should ensure that all trade unions become a partner in the productivity race and that all concerned join hand in our effort to alleviate poverty.

A Shameful Practice

A team of medical scientists from the General Medical Council (GMC) of Britain is now touring Bangladesh. They are here to assess the eligibility of medical degrees awarded by the Barisal and Rangpur Medical Colleges for recognition by the GMC. The recognition is a key to higher professional studies as also jobs in the UK — and as such in many other countries.

The coordinator of the team, Dr Akram Sayeed, has in an interview to The Daily Star said that physicians in our nation's hospitals were doing their best for the patients against heavy odds. The condition of our hospitals has appalled Dr Sayeed. For one thing, these need much more by way of medical equipment, he has said. We had to wait for a physician coming from abroad to be told the incredible fact of some hospitals lacking even a sphygmomanometer — the blood pressure metering machine.

We do not know much about the doctors doing their best in those medical fish markets called the hospitals. We are certain, however, that things are far worse down there than Dr Sayeed has been allowed to see. Let us forget about the private hospitals which, with a few exceptions of course, fleece the patients and yet do not have their own surgeons and doctors or even the necessary equipment. The standard practice there is to send more serious cases down to the government administered ones. Except for some, it is patently a dishonest business they are doing — without proper investment in both appropriate manpower and equipment.

The government hospitals, which form almost the whole of the nation's medicare system, have long been a chronic patient to three maladies: government ineptitude and apathy, overflowing by patients and pervasive corruption. The situation prevailing in the Dhaka Medical College for years is little short of a national shame. The nation's health authorities have seemingly abandoned all thoughts of ever salvaging these hospitals from their pre-Florence Nightingale conditions.

What joins the badness of the nursing homes and government hospitals and a big section of practising medical men in a scandalous connection — is the fact of using the government hospitals by their government appointed doctors as a patient recruiting centre for the private ones. This utter lack of professionalism has, more than any other drawback including the absence of even basic medical equipment, been contributing to the undoing of the main body of our collective medical enterprise. Dr Akram Sayeed hasn't possibly had the opportunity of knowing about this unethical practice.

Human Tragedy in Bosnia and European Dilemma

by Muslehuddin Ahmad

A member of Bosnian Presidency openly warned the West about the spread of terrorism all over Europe — this time by the Europeans. This is unfortunate but bound to happen. The Europeans cannot blame others. They stand totally exposed in dealing with Bosnian crisis.

In the intensive care unit of the Rosevo Hospital's children's clinic, Selma Sistic lies immobile, eyes closed, her severely burned body swathed in bandages. She is 8 years old.

Her 12-year old sister lies close by, also heavily bandaged for the burns suffered when a Serbian incendiary shell engulfed their home in flames Sunday.

It is touch-and-go whether Selma will live. Her doctors say it would be a struggle under any circumstance, with third degree burns to 75 per cent of her body. — New York Times Service

If the father and brothers of these two unfortunate girls of Sarajevo are alive at all and go for revenge today or tomorrow on Serbs or their direct or indirect supporters, should they be branded as terrorists? A member of Bosnian Presidency openly warned the West about the spread of terrorism all over Europe — this time by the Europeans. This is unfortunate but bound to happen. The Europeans cannot blame others. They stand totally exposed in dealing with Bosnian crisis. They punish Saddam and others for their violations of human rights but do nothing when mass murders, rapes, ethnic cleansing, destruction of civilian properties have been taking place in their neighbourhood.

The most unfortunate part is that Bosnian Muslims are being repeatedly denied their right to defend themselves; the resolution for arming the Bosnian Muslims failed to get required majority, despite US support, in the UN Security Council. Some European leaders argued that arming of Bosnian Muslims would intensify the war and lead to more deaths — as if deaths have not been taking place in Bosnia.

Unfortunately Bosnian Muslims are the victims. If Bosnian Serbs were massacred by Bosnian Muslims, how other European countries would have reacted? This question was raised by conscious people around the world many times — there was no answer as the answer was obvious and this "obviousness" is now agitating people's mind and may lead to new religious polarization. This is undoubtedly dangerous for the world and must be avoided at any cost as the extremists elements must not be given the chance to exploit the situation.

As the situation stands, only the US, being physically away from this dangerous Balkan war

and also holding some neutral and positive stand on Bosnia, is in a position to stop this part of the world drifting into total ethnic chaos that would be too dangerous for the civilized world as a whole. The US did the right thing in supporting the resolution for arming Bosnian Muslims but apparently it did not put enough pressure on its allies, which could have at least led to the adoption of the resolution. The very passage of the resolution would have greatly altered the situation on the ground as this would have forced the Serbs to go for negotiations keeping in view the territorial integrity of Bosnia Herzegovina.

Similar reactions were observed among Serbian leaders when President Clinton earlier talked in terms of US military strikes against Serbian military positions. However, as there appears no chance, at least not in the near future, to have the possibility of arming Bosnian Muslims for their self defense, there appears more justification and urgency now for the US to go for military strikes. Several

leaders in the US have spoken positively in favour of this. Senator Richard Lugar, a senior member of US Senate Foreign Relations Committee said — "The Clinton Administration, unable to win allied support for ending the United Nations arms embargo against Bosnia, should bypass the United Nations and unilaterally arm the Bosnian Muslims". He also said — "United States should proceed with air strikes against Serbian military positions even if its European allies do not agree to participate". By acting against Serbian military, President Clinton will not only help stop further genocide but also stop possible expansion of "terrorism" based on revenge. Indeed proposed US action against Serbs will earn US enough credibility among Muslims around the world and also induce the radicals groups to think twice before acting against the US and US interests. In fact, the whole tide of terrorism against the US may change its course. President Clinton must not miss this opportunity; he must act to stop the human tragedy that has

been taking place in the midst of the 'civilized' people.

The world and particularly the Muslim countries must recognize that "Bosnian Muslims face oblivion". According to the latest press reports, "political extinction emerges as apparent Serbian goal". Serbian nationalist leaders are looking beyond partitions towards the extinction of Muslims as an independent political force. Ambivalence, reluctance, hesitations for whatever reasons have come in the way of European powers to act. The UN, in the circumstances, appears helpless. The idea of protecting Bosnian "safe havens" appears meaningless as, this has neither stopped nor even reduced Serbian aggression. As reports show, Sarajevo is under regular Serbian attacks. The dispatch of fighter aircraft to give aircover to the UN soldiers will not protect the Muslim enclaves. These must be used for air strikes on specific Serbian military targets and such military strikes will make those artillery positions ineffective and thus save those "safe havens"

and the UN soldiers protecting them. The very start of air strikes will make Serbians psychologically weak; they will realize that the international community has started acting against the Serbian savagery. Therefore, immediate starting of air strikes is a must to save the remaining Bosnian Muslims from extinction.

Milosevic, Karadzic and their stooges started talking about Muslim majority in Bosnia in future through increased birthrate and possible Muslim control of Serbs and Croats. The spread of such poisonous notion may create religious feuds all over the continent. They also oppose stationing of UN forces from Muslim countries in Bosnia. UN forces do not work under religious commands; they carry out the commands of the UN. Bosnian Muslims never objected to the deployment of non-Muslim UN forces in Bosnia. This the entire strategy of Bosnian Serbs is highly dangerous for the peace and security of the world. Let the civilized world act unitedly against Serbian thugs and criminals. Any failure to act decisively will bring incalculable damage to the present-day society. Those refusing to act will be held responsible for this human tragedy in Bosnia and dangerous consequences thereafter.

New UNDP Chief reveals 'Bottoms-up' Priority

Ian Steele writes from the United Nations

It is estimated 13-18 million people died every year from poverty-related causes. "That's the same human toll as 100 fully loaded 747s crashing daily," Mr Speth said.

A prominent environmentalist has been appointed to the helm of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) — the world's largest multilateral grant assistance organisation.

He is James Gustave (Gus) Speth, founding President of the World Resources Institute and a senior advisor on President Clinton's transition team. Before founding the World Resources Institute, Mr Speth was Chairman of President Carter's Council on Environmental Quality. Between 1981 and 1982 he was Professor of Law at Georgetown University Law Centre in Washington, DC, where he taught environmental and constitutional law.

Mr Speth replaces William H Draper III who had held the post of UNDP Administrator since 1986.

Meeting with the press at United Nations headquarters, Mr Speth said the gravest challenges facing the developing world today were poverty and a deteriorating environment. "The two are linked," he said. "They reinforce each other in a tragic downward spiral and both are exacerbated by mounting population pressures."

Mr Speth said estimated 13-18 million people died every year from poverty-related causes. "That's the same human toll as 100 fully loaded 747s crashing daily," he said. "Resources are also under

unprecedented stress. An area the size of India and China combined has experienced moderate to severe soil deterioration since World War II, yet we know that to feed the world of 2050 adequately will require all the land now under cultivation to be as productive as (American) farmland."

Mr Speth said that under his leadership UNDP, with some 6,000 development projects valued at roughly US\$7 billion, would give priority attention to poverty alleviation and environmental regeneration. He said that while the world focused on the efforts of United Nations peacekeeping troops in more than a dozen trouble spots around the world, some 24,000 national and international experts and UN volunteers were serving the cause of development under UNDP in 174 developing countries.

Mr Speth's appointment has been generally well received at UNDP which has made special efforts to factor the environmental impact of projects into its decision-making.

UNDP has also gained attention with its human development reports which focus on the needs of people ahead of economic theory. Published annually since 1990, the Human Development Report has suggested that international donors weight their contributions in favour of nations that enlarge the choices of their citizens by investing in health, education

and income earning opportunities in the private sector.

Respect for human rights has also been introduced as a somewhat controversial contingency. Of the 93 country programmes approved by UNDP for the period 1992-1996, 79 have a major focus on human development.

"I hope we can build from the bottom up, concerted international efforts against the impoverishment of people and the impoverishment of the environment," Mr Speth said.

"We can begin by putting our full weight behind a new model of development — one that not only generates economic growth but distributes its benefits equitably, sustains environmental resources for future production and future generations, and empowers people to participate in the economy and decisions that affect their lives. None of the great goals for which the United Nations works — peace, human rights, social justice, environmental quality — can be realised without it."

One of the most pressing challenges for the new Administrator will be to reverse a decline in external assistance for developing countries. Voluntary contributions for UNDP, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) fell by 10 per cent between 1992 and 1993. — *Depthnews Asia*

OPINION

"Towards a Fishless Menu"

M Shafi

Your editorial 'Towards a Fishless Menu' published on June 17, has prompted me to write. I fully agree with the concern expressed by you and appreciate your love for fish. But I object to the statement of Dr Shahadat Ali that Mohashole (Tor tor) has become extinct in Bangladesh. I draw your attention to a scientific paper on Mohashole published in Bangladesh Journal of Zoology (1991, Vol 19, No 1, Page 47-54). Mohashole likes clean water and is distributed in Netrokona and Sunamganj (rivers Kongsha, Someswar, Para), Dinajpur (river Mahananda) as well as Chittagong Hill Tracts (Kaptai reservoir). According to BFDC landing record, a maximum of 2,894 kg of Mohashole was caught in Kaptai reservoir in 1986, about 1500 kg in 1987. However, only 59 kg of the fish was caught in 1990. I have seen some specimens of Mohashole being sold in Plassey and New Market fish stalls a couple of months before. Another species with same local name of Mohashole, *Tor putitora*, has been reported by Mr A Rahman in 1989 in Someswar and Kongsha rivers, and from the confluence of Teesta and Riyang rivers in northern districts. It is clearly stated in the above-mentioned scientific paper that Mohashole is an endangered species and not yet extinct.

One of the potential environmental impacts of flood action plan developments (presently 26 plans are under execution by the Flood Plan coordination organisation; many earlier plans have already been implemented and embankments, polders etc have been constructed by BWDB) is increased threats to endangered species. So, the production of Mohashole and all other fishes

are decreasing everyday. This is also the case with Nandina (*Laboo mandina*). This fish is also not extinct but is a threatened species. Nandina was once very abundant in the beels and rivers of greater Mymensingh and Sylhet districts. All threatened animals need man's special attention for continuance of their existence.

Bangladesh is the richest country in the world in genetic diversity of freshwater fish. But the evolution of most of the species of fish and prawns here has taken place in such a way that their reproduction is adapted with the monsoon season. They have become highly tuned to the onset of rainy season as in other tropical and sub-tropical countries. Rains act as a trigger for sexual maturation and movement into the flood plains for spawning. Here the eggs hatch, and the fry and fingerlings begin their first stage of development in water that is nutrient-enriched by the flooded land and decaying terrestrial organic matter. As the rainy season passes, the fish are concentrated in the residual water courses and standing water bodies. It is during this spawning run and later movement back to deep water shelter (beel, river) that the most intensive exploitation by millions of rural people occurs. Thus, the monsoon inundated floodplain, as a seasonal habitat, plays the most important role in the continuation and sustenance of a large number of fish and prawn species. All sorts of flood action plan developments in the form of embankments, polders etc serve as barrier between river and floodplain and vice versa, thus stopping the lateral movements and seriously affecting the sustenance process. The beels are also similarly disconnected from the floodplain. So, under altered ecological conditions, all our freshwater fish and prawn species are going to become threatened species.

It may be true that under flood-free environment culture-based fish production would be increased. But the expensive pond fish production will never surpass the inexpensive natural fish production. Besides, the fish genetic diversity would be lost, mainly affecting subsistence level fishing by the rural mass. Open water artificial stocking is again no answer to natural fish production. Availability of large size fingerlings is one of the main constraints for open water stocking programme. Local technology for the production of required billions of large size fingerlings has not yet been developed. We should not expect donors to finance stocking of all our open water every year. Taka 1,750/- has been estimated by World Bank as cost of stocking for every hectare of open water. The money which is available from World Bank for stocking during the 4th 5-Year Plan (1991-1995) will help stocking of 15 per cent of the open water. What's about the rest 85 per cent? Will there be any stocking there? If yes, who will bear the cost?

The problem may be solved if the private sector is involved in the production of large fingerlings, preferably beside the waterbody to be stocked. But, beforehand, local technology for nursing and rearing large size fingerlings must be developed. Again, in the name of artificial stocking, beels should never be used as beel nursery, particularly on account of the presence of so many insect predators there. Large-scale use of rotenone in the beels for the control of these predators is far from scientific and hazardous. The practice may denude the

water of life turning a fertile waterbody into a barren one. Have we not learned any lesson from the increasing use of agricultural insecticides? Rotenone in nursery beels may destroy a part of the subsistence food fish resource. So, the present stocking and rotenone programme has become a controversial issue. Is there any country in the world where rotenone has been applied or experimented in such vast water areas? There should be national consensus over the large-scale use of rotenone in beels. Instead, the beels may be safely used as rearing ground for producing large fingerlings, when the application of rotenone would not be necessary.

We can help ourselves in different ways. We can adopt more rational scientific technique which will save the fish from disruption of their life-cycles. There are hundreds of different water control structures in the form of regulator, sluice gate or navigation lock all over the country. These structures are kept open when it becomes necessary to expel water from one side to other, i.e., for both inflow and outflow. These structures may be kept open twice every year (possibly once on the onset of monsoon in June and again during receding of water in October) for one or two weeks, even at the cost of flooding, so that the adult fish, egg, fry or fingerlings, can pass through the passage. The exact dates for lateral movement (passive or active) of different fish species from rivers to floodplains and vice versa should be found out (life-cycles of fishes and information on movement of fishes are being studied by FAP 17). The opening of the regulator/sluice gate at the precise time and the correct water current speed are to be ensured for enabling the fish/fry/fingerling to cross over the barrier. High water current speed will deter the fish to move away from the passage and will not help. The water current speed should be such that the fish/fry/fingerling can tolerate (probably 3 m/second). Usually, the river fish move by night and the floodplain fish move by day.

There is another way by which we can help the fish. This is to provide permanent fish passes where required. It is understood that FAP 17 has prepared several designs of fish passes for possible use in Bangladesh, which are economic to build and to maintain. We should give much stress on the immediate construction of fish passes in all major fish production areas. The construction of a fish pass should be given the highest priority to stocking programme. Construction of large structure, such as fish lift, should be avoided. The fish lift built in Farakka Barrage for hilsa passage was not successful, although the Barrage Authority has been illegally harvesting about 300 MT of hilsa every year from the collection pit of the fish lift. It has been suggested that the existing drainage sluices in Bangladesh may be used as fish passage. If the conditions are correct, the drainage outflows may attract fish migrating upstream and allow them to pass into the floodplain. The design and operation of the sluice gate have a considerable bearing on this. Fish passage along with better management only can save all the threatened fishes and as well maintain genetic diversity.

The writer who holds a doctorate from the University of Glasgow is a Professor — and a former Chairman — in the Department of Zoology, University of Dhaka.

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.

Bosnia: the British view

Sir, It pained me much to know the views of John Major, the British Prime Minister, on the question of lifting the arms embargo on Bosnian Muslims. It was frustrating to hear the logic behind the British opinion — it did not want to see further fuelling of the killing and stopping of humanitarian assistance. But what is happening now?

My question is — has the logic been able to stop the killing, primarily, the trapped, undefended, innocent women, elders and children? Does the British Premier think the world would accept and appreciate his reason? It may be reminded that it is not only John Major, but Douglas Hurd, Riffkind and other British leaders, excepting the Iron Lady, expressed the same views. It looks the British leaders are indifferent to the pitiable misery of the Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina. But, at the same time, we see a different picture when we watch the actions of the British troops working under the banner of UN in that area.

To a citizen of a country of this sub-continent, it is not difficult to understand the British character in general. Wherever they were as colonial rulers, they have left the germs of perpetual discord, discontentment and feud. It is really pity to see

the Bosnian refugees being flown into Malaysia, Pakistan and not finding their proper shelter in Europe. It is these so-called champions of human rights who, because of their technological and financial strength, dictate their terms and impose their will on others. It appears they have no conscience for rational judgment.

Time has come for the Muslims to show their strength by upholding the just cause as per the teachings of the Holy Quran and the examples of the Holy Prophet (SM) — Oh Muslims, wake up from the slumber and the worldly luxurious life.

A Citizen
Mohakhali, Dhaka

Diet soft drinks

Sir, We have a lot of brands of soft drinks in the country. All these cold drinks have high sugar content which many people would like to avoid for many reasons. For such category of consumers there is sugar free drinks like 'diet' soft drinks in all the developed countries and even in many developing ones. In UK a two-litre bottle of 'diet' drink costs less than a pound. So that is cheap. In our country occasionally a limited quantity of diet drinks are imported but then the cost is exorbitant and hence it is be-

yond the reach of common consumers.

Unfortunately, no factory for producing diet drinks has been set up either in private or public sector. It is not understood why nobody is coming up with initiative in this field. Cost of setting up such a factory is not very high and technology is as simple as that of normal soft drinks. Hence I urge the government to set up such a factory in the public sector which can later be sold out to private entrepreneurs. This will fulfil a genuine need of a large number of consumers.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka Cantt.

Justice sought

Sir, One Mr Amirul Islam bought the house at 43, Bhogoboti Saha Sonkho Nidhi Road, Narinda, Dhaka in 1948 and has since been living in it peacefully and honourably for long 36 (thirty-six) years till the fateful day of October 5, 1984.

In 1981, one Ramzan Ali forged (otherwise, how?) deed in his wife Mrs Ashia Khatun's name showing her as owner of this house. Based on this deed, Ashia Khatun filed a case in the Judge's Court, Dhaka (Case Number 33/81) claiming ownership rights to this house. The Honourable Court dismissed her petition outright on 24.6.1982.

Ashia Khatun again filed a case (Number 46/82) in the Judge's Court, Dhaka. Accordingly, the Court issued a summons to Mr Amirul Islam but Ashia Khatun and her husband Ramzan Ali managed (obviously, or?) to keep this summons secret and sup-

pressed. As a result, the Honourable Court gave an ex parte judgement. On 5.10.1984, Ashia Khatun and her husband with the help of police expelled the old and frail Amirul Islam and his family members from 43, Bhogoboti Saha Sonkho Nidhi Road and dumped the household furniture and goods on the street. Mr Amirul Islam miserably failed to seek redress from the Honourable Court as it was closed at that time.

He later on filed a case (Number 279/84) seeking justice by restoration of his rightful ownership to this house. After waging the court battle for two years, Mr Amirul Islam died after living a miserable life. Forfeiture of his right to his own abode tormented him till the very last moments of his death on 19.6.1986.

Mr Amirul Islam's children, represented by his eldest son Badrul Islam, fought the court battle for a decade by staying elsewhere in a rented house incurring huge financial loss. The Honourable Court declared the ex parte decree in favour of Mrs Ashia Khatun as null and void by an order issued on 23.2.1993.

But it is regretful and bizarre that late Mr Amirul Islam's children are unable to seek possession of their house in spite of a standing order from the Honourable Court restoring this house's ownership to them. Ashia Khatun and her husband backed by their henchmen are threatening Badrul Islam and his brothers and sisters with dire consequences if they dare seek possession of this house. When would justice be implemented?

Neazul Islam
Dhuanandi R/A, Dhaka