Dhaka, Tuesday, July 27, 1993

When a Family is an Island

It is hard to call the condition of our flooded eastern districts a tragedy. For a near-regular oc currence, very much apprehended from well before, cannot by any stretch of imagination be a tragedy Instead a big blasted tragedy lies in the total lack of perception among the social, economic and political leaderships siting snugly in Dhaka of the harrowing misery that has gripped almost one-third of the nation's population. And equally in the fact of government's complete unpreparedness to meet such all too predictable a situation.

Water has now blanketed all of the Teesta-Jamuna and Surma Monu-Kushiara-Meghna basin with pockets of Dhaka-Mymensingh and Noakhali spared to date. And there is time till October for the Himalayan torrents to come down enveloping the rest of our districts. The government cannot be expected to reach succour to every one of the 100 million souls that would get swamped in that case - or even to the ones now under the watery seize, some plus-minus 30 million. This is not to speak of rehabilitation of the affected, which is quite out of the government's will and capacity. If government had both of these. Bangladesh would be true Sonar

Bangla sooner than Aladin's lamp could transform

it into. The crux of the problem - as it is - is that mil-Nons are marooned with endless expanses of water se parating the few in their family from society and civilisation. Out there every family is an island. How will they be reached? And by whom? And what will they be reached? Are there enough countn' boats to go to each of these human islands? Are there enough manpower who would do this reaching business specially when neither the armed forces nor the voluntary private initiatives have so far Deen involved. What are they carrying to the marcioned people? The total amount set for relief work was Taka 16 lakh - incredible but true - till Saturday. The figure has been raised to Taka 18 crore - - far too small to cope with the first needs of even or re-fourth of the 28 districts. We know this figure will swell to even billions - and things would start moving long after the urgency has passed and much of the purse going to line the pockets of the unaffected people in right

positions. What can be done? Drinking water and food-a lot of dry and processed food-must reach the marooned ones - all of them as the first move. These must be followed with clothes and appropriate drugs - and never may the process be reversed. One big gap has already started yawning - has the government in stock the quantity of oral salines that would be needed in a matter of days? In some earlier cases when society was successfully involved in relief, millions of these life-saving satchets were produced and dispatched to where they were needed entirely through private initiative. What is going to happen this time? Can paracetamols alone, or for that matter, costly but most inappropriate drugs - as absurd as dolls - that come from abroad as relief items, see us through the health condition that would engulf the region emerging out of the watery clutch?

We are asking so many disquieting questions in the belief that the bunch of these and hundreds of others would not compare even in atomic proportions the suffering that millions are in right now And we ask these fully aware of the limitations of the kind of governance available at present. At the same time we are convinced that there are pockets of efficiency and dedication to duty. Who can forget the angel-like performance of the Public Health Engineering in the wake of the elemental strike in the south on what we called Doomsmonday, April 29, 1991. Before any other succour could reach the islanders on the Bay, tubewells were sunk in the most inaccessible of offshore vastnesses - and life's elixir was reached to the survivors.

The so-called and much-questioned Flood Action Plan is, for sure, a non-starter. Let us for God's sake start being prepared in right earnest on a scale that meaningfully mitigate the suffering of such nation-sized visitations. And let us be serious, truly and sincerely, about the long-term antidotes of this national predicament.

Massacre in Rio

The killing of eight street children by unidentified gunmen in the Brazilian city Rio de Janeiro on Friday last is a grim reminder of the constant danger facing the most desenceless of the South American city population. Although the number of death confirmed was eight, news agencies put the casualty number at 25. The country was thunderstruck by the tragic news and has expressed dismay over the nightly shooting spree. Popular shock and outrage was so intense that they prompted President Itamar Franco to order Justice Minister Mauricio Correa to immediately carry out an investigation into the ghastly massacre.

While the post-murder response from the Brazilians has been laudable, one does not find enough reasons for not accusing the Brazilian government for its failure to come up with a rehabilitation programme for the innumerable street children. It is an old problem in many of the Latin American countries where affluence and poverty cohabit in the most bizarre manner possible. Neither are such attacks on the floating children new. For ages they have been looked down as social parasites by a section of the city people. The police are also not known to be particularly well indisposed towards these uncared and unloved teenagers who do odd bits of mental jobs.

Not surprisingly, a police officer has been cited as responsible for the killing of children this time. Already three members of the military police had been taken to custody for their alleged involvement in the heinous crime. If the accusing fingers are pointed to the law enforcing agency, the question of such vulnerable section's physical protection is left in a quandary. Whether it's deliberately by the administration or because of lack of policies or cooperation between it and the agencies concerned

cannot be ascertained. However, there is no doubt that apart from some social organisations' relief works among the neglected children of the streets, nothing worth its salt has been done by the government. Such incidents are worrying specially when the issue of children's rights is getting focus the world over not to mention the conventions and the observance of the decade of children. But Brazil is not the only country to have failed to uphold the cause of children. Therefore, the international community must rise beyond its rhetorics and devote enough money. time, energy and research in creating a right envi-

ronment for children's development.

Students and Authorities: A Question of Understanding

slogan-chanting proces sion of students passing by the corridors. The average size of the procession could be any thing between twenty and fifty. If nearer to twenty, then it is one of those routine things, something over which a formal protest was due, and a procession is the accepted manner of registering your protest. If nearer to fifty, the feeling is stronger, and the particular student organisation has a real following. The sight and the sound, in either case, would stagger any casual visitor but not the average student, or the average teacher of the institution, be it a college or a university. I am more familiar with the university version of this phenomenon whose origins I can trace back in the sixties. By now it has lost its novelty. Nobody is surprised, nobody feels scandalised. Most of the time, a slogan-chanting procession is a periodic thing, and most students and teachers ac-

cept it as a part of the game. But the other day, when the student organisations - I am not sure if all of them were in it - gave a call for a nation-wide strike it was not one of those routine things. It did not stop with a procession which usually ends with some merrimaking somewhere outside the general view. The protestors enforced some - not total - suspension of classes. The issue was the proposed enhancement of fees which could affect all government institutions and universities. Neither the size of the pro-

HE unleashing of the

ed Farrah Aideed and his rebel

forces through the military

power of the United States is yet

another example of the morally

suspect basis on which the

United Nations has been

The chase for Aideed, loosely

deemed as a war criminal, and

the use of US forces as world

policeman recall not only the

1991 Gulf war but also the

more unilateral US expedition

into Pananma in 1989, using

Stealth bombers, and the cap-

ture of strongman Manuel

The UN, say its critics, has

been run down the decades as

the club of the rich Western na-

tions, and, more often than not,

as their bully boy. During the

Cold War, much was made of

the tilt of the General Assembly

toward the socialist bloc led by

the now dissolved Soviet Union

even though the Assembly's al-

legiance lay more with the Non-

That perception was decep-

tive. The General Assembly was

able, from time to time, to block

initiatives of the US and

Western Europe, for example,

through the voting process.

Such actions were no more

than temporary embarrassment

but even then carried a heavy

price in financial sanctions. The

threat of budget'cutbacks kept

not only the General Assembly

toeing the West's line but also

the many social and economic

agencies of the UN, including

been with the Security Council

and the permanent members

that arrogated to themselves the

power of the veto after the UN

was set up following the end of

World War Two. Through the

ability to block even the most

popular proposals coming from

the overwhelming majority of

leaders of these two nations are

forging an economic and

trying to emerge from Russia's

shadow and has been looking

toward nearby Iran as one

The ex-Soviet republic is

military trade alliance.

territory in 1922.

HRISTIAN Georgia may

with Muslim Iran, but

have little in common

The real power has always

Unesco.

aligned Movement.

functioning.

Noriega.

world's might against

Somali warlord Moham

cossion nor the noise accompanying it nor the fact that a certain number of classes could not be held could be taken as evidence that the protest was deeply felt or widely shared. But then we have no means of knowing. We are not used to

opinion polls. As far as I know, the proposal is to raise tuition fees from Tk. 10/12 to Tk. 25.00 per mensem. The earlier rate was fixed more than fifty years ago. During this fifty years, much water has flowed down the Ganges. Much change has taken place in the institutions themselves. Guardians, during these fifty years, have revised their budget for a university-going ward from what it was in the fifties - Tk 100 or thereabouts - to what it is today. Tk.1500, more or less. So things have not remained stationary. Despite this steep rise in the cost of education, the crowd at the portals of the universities - indeed of all reputable institutions - have kept on swelling. In other words, by now there are twenty times the number of guardians who are both willing and able to spend enhanced amount of money to secure higher education for their wards. Many of them gladly spend more for elementary education of their smaller children.

Those of us who have time to survey the basic economic aspect of our educational system, with all its variations, absurdities and enormities, will be intrigued by the reaction of the students to which I have referred just now. But those who know our people will not be

surprised. The absurdity of the situation reminds me of one propaganda point of the former Soviet regime. As against the inflation of Western economy, they used to flaunt the unchanging pricelevel of foodstuff, of transportation, may be also of house rent, obtaining under the socialist system. So long the system worked, it worked well. But there must have been some unreality, some crude stage management, behind the scene The artificiality could not be sustained, and the system came

Once I got there, at the end of a two and half hours' journey by road, my reservations, which I kept to myself, slowly gave way to more positive feelings. Just a village, a mere village, one of the sixty-four thousand or so of Bangladesh [I like the figure, sixty-four thousand, four x four x four makes a sixty four) and we stood, on the solid grounds the college could call its own. A few tin sheds, a garden, a sizeable field with trees growing around, a tank with high banks and these with their plantations. - the whole scene sug-

gested beginnings with a future. Two things impressed me most about this visit. One: a few

CLOUDS PASSING Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

crashing down. And it collapsed from within, not because the Americans wanted it so.

There is the same unreality, the same artificiality, about the fees structure over here. Outside the sanctified institutions the laws of economics have operated freely. Within them, the operations have been smothered or kept at bay.

I had this thought haunting my mind when, some six weeks ago. I was visiting a college in a remote village. I could not refuse the earnest importunities of a former student, now the Principal of the college, aided and abetted by the founder of the college. The college was formally bidding farewell to its outgoing students, about to sit for their HSC examinations.

mile's before we had reached the village, we were stopped by some twenty youngsters on their bicycles. This was the advance party to greet us and to escort us and the party consisted of boys and girls of the college. I had not expected bicycle - riding girls in this remote village. So time has moved in the remotest backwaters of Bangladesh, and we in our metropolitan Dhaka knew

nothing about it! The second thing that impressed me was the information that I gathered along with much else. The college was charging tuition fees at the rate of Tk. one hundred per month. When they raised it to present figures, there was a slight fall in enrollment, but it was compensated

was not affected. Was there any resistance

from the students? from the community that the college served? — was my question. The answer was in the negative On the contrary, the authorities had a further rise of fees under consideration, and they expected no resistance.

What was the basis of this

confidence, I wondered. They told me. The college was providing instruction with so much devotion, order and regularity, which was in sharp contrast with neighbouring colleges, that it had earned a goodwill of the community which others failed to do. The college was capitalising on this goodwill. It has been trying, at the same time, to obtain the grant-in-aid from the government which, it hopes, will come its way sooner or later. Meanwhile the performance of the college keeps improving, both in terms of the percentage of passes - HSC examination of 1992: 80% with 12 in the 1st. div. - and in terms of that intangible thing, the confidence of the community.

And so I come to my point: the institution and the confidence of the community. For the universities, the community is coextensive with the nation Even universities with a regional bias are national, in the sense that tuition fees are not graded as these are in the state universities of America. The University Acts provide for - in a way - communal participation in the affairs of the univer-

sity; the composition of the Senate with a substantial representation of registered graduates points to this nation. As a link with the community, this is rather narrow. The Senate, as it now functions, and with its present composition, hardly represents the community's voice. The universities exist in isolation, and they do not reach out to the community with their problems and their inspirations. The divorce is complete. it all boils down to what is

known in today's parlance as communication gap. University budgets, as we ought to know, are the worst examples of aiddependence, in an open market/free economy situation like ours. There is hardly any internal resource mobilisation. One legitimate source, tuition fees, has always been considered as inviolable, though the reason is not clear to see. The universities have failed to take the community into confidence and therefore has been reduced to depend on the intervention of the government in doing something which is clearly within its competence to do. The government will have to bear the brunt of student opposition because the universities are unable to do so on their own or taking the community along with them in a perfectly legitimate move.

How, in what process of gradual decline, the universities have been reduced to this impotency is a different story altogether It will be a complicated story but worth the telling. Please wait.

Time to Reform the United Nations?

Mohamed Hamaludin writes from Miami

Since its inception the UN has been run as the club of the rich Western nations, and despite their numerical superiority, the developing countries have little power on decision making. The Western domination of the world's economic institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank further undermines the case of the poor countries. The problems of the developing world will not be solved until the world's economic and political institutions are reformed.

Keepers of the peace: UN forces around the world



the members of the world body, a single country with a veto -US, Britain, France, the former Soviet Union (now Russia) and China, decided the world's po-

sition on crucial issues. That stranglehold over the overnance of the world has been matched by an equally powerful control over the globe's economic and financial affairs through the Bretton Woods agreement that established the

International Bank for Reconstruction Development (the World Bank) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Through those two institutions, the West imposed its ideology on the smaller states and severely punished those that tended to wander

This division of the world between the powerful indsutrialised countries and the rest of

the planet was an update of what happened after Columbus made his fateful voyages to the Americas and the "discovered" lands were marked up, at times literally, among the colonial

The South could hardly resist the 20th Century sharing of the spoils of conquest because just after World War Two the world became caught up in the unholy arms race that came to

be known as the Cold War. In effect, that period strengthened the military might of the West through a huge arms build-up that was said to be needed to keep communism at bay. The world's resources, already grossly exploited for the

benefit of the Western nations,

were further depleted in this

military madness, and the rich

richer and more powerful. Even worse, the newly independent nations, pawns really in the East-West confrontation, found their post colonial dreams frustrated as they were locked in the battle for ideological supremacy. Many of them have ended up with distorted economies, ruled by dictators, who have become super-rich

and have the blood of their own

people on their hands. With the end of the Cold War, another division of the globe between the North and South is becoming sharper. The developing world, which comprises four-fifths of humanity, is hoping that the victory of democracy over communism will lead to democratisation of the international institutions that govern the world's political and economic affairs

Although there is talk of expanding the membership of the Security Council to bring in Germany and Japan, the inclu-

Georgian leader and former

Soviet foreign minister Eduard

Shevardnadze underlined Iran's

importance in Tbilisi's long-

term plans by making it the

first foreign country he visited

As Soviet foreign minister,

Shevardnadze was one of the

first foreign statesmen to meet

with then spiritual leader

Iran has already pledged to

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

since taking power.

sion of a Third World country with veto power is still off the agenda of big powers.

Western nations, seeking to impose their brand of democracy on the rest of the world, sound hollow when they refuse to democratise the UN, the IMF and the World Bank. They refuse to allow the world's a fairs to be truly controlled by the world and not by a handful of nations armed with nuclear and other weapons.

The talk of reforming the UN system is treated with scepticiam by critics since they charge the UN system has failed to slove the problems of poverty in the developing world.

Many analysts doubt the UN's actions in Somalia and its seeming paralysts over the bloody war by the Serbs and Croats against Bosnian Muslims. There are at least a dozen wars in Africa and other parts of the developing world that the UN is ignoring.

For millions of people in the Third World there is no other avenue for help from the brutality of their own government; many of them clients of the regimes that ran the world during the Cold War. The UN is their only hope.

If the UN accepts that duty, as was done in Somalia in the carly days to ease the famine, then it will be seen to have a role in future world affairs. For that it must allow the developing countries a greater role in the decision making processes. Failing that, more and more Third World citizens will seek their freedom by fleeing political or economic persecution at home to the capitals of the new masters and take their wars to those capitals.

- GEMINI NEWS

MOHAMED HAMALUDIN is Managing Editor of the Maimi

Seeking Passage through Iran

Exchanges between Tbilisi and Tehran have led to a series of accords that could turn Georgia into an energy transit hub for Iranian oil and gas and lead to the sale of Georgian-

means of accomplishing its es-Relations between Georgia and Russia are strained as a result of Russian backing for sep aratists in Abkhazia, an autonomous Black Sea republic created by Lenin on Georgian For its part, Iran, which is

seemingly bent on becoming the premier power in the Caucasus and Central Asia, sees Georgia as its key to the region.

Georgia looks toward Iran as it struggles out of Russia's shadow. James Dorsey reports made Soviet warplanes to Iran.

In May, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mahmoud Vaezi signed an agreement under which Iran will export five million cubic metres of natural gas per day to Georgia and help the former Soviet republic in oil exploration and petrochemical

Earlier, a delegation from Iran's desence ministry had visited Georgia's Sukhoi airplane

from Tbilisi factory near Tbilisi. Deprived of raw materials from Russia and short of cash, Georgia is trying to restart plane production and export both its Soviet-designed

Sukhoi 25 fighter and the Jag 48 six-seater civilian jet. Iran captured several Sukhoi 25s from Iraq during their eight-year long Gulf war and was suitably impressed, Western diplomats here say.

They add that Iran may supply aluminium to produce

the planes in exchange for Georgian willingness to sell them to the Islamic republic. Georgia, however, would remain dependent on Russia for the

Sukhoi 25s electronics. Officials here suggest Georgia may try to sell the planes to Iran through Russia to shield itself from international criticism. "It's a good and healthy idea, it would be a joint venture," comments Russian

sell Georgia two billion cubic metres of gas a year or an estimated 25 per cent of its total need as well as chemicals, foodstuffs and clothes. ambassador Alexander Zemsky.

Georgia aims to become an international economic and energy hub and hopes a consortium including Chevron and British Gas, will opt to pump oil from Kazakhstan through Georgia to Europe.

Iran has already expressed interest in financing expansion of the Black Sea port of Poti and modernisation of the Georgian refinery in Batumi. In addition, the oil and gas pipeline linking Azerbaijan with Georgia is expected to be extended to Iran.

Iran and Georgia are also drafting plans to construct a highway from Poti via the Azeri capital of Baku to Tehran.

"Routing the oil through Georgia is very important. This will be the motor for our economic development," says Georgian Deputy Industry Minister Givi Talakvadze, drawing a map showing the country as the linchpin in an oil pipeline network from Central Asia, Iran, Azerbaijan and oil-rich Chechenya in the northern

Caucasus. Georgian officials are already busy drafting plans to turn their · country into the Switzerland of the Caucasus.

But for the time being, Georgia seems closer to imitating wartorn Lebanon than it does peaceful Switzerland.

Besides the war in Abkhazia, other regions of Georgia have yet to accept Tbilisi's rule. And its rapidly deteriorating relationship with Russia and an infrastructure and an economic system in dire need of overhaul will dampen Georgian hopes for quick results.

Foreign investors have been reluctant to touch Georgia and domestic capital is fleeing the country because of instability within and outside it.

But Georgia's officials insist they can push through with their plans if only the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development would grant them the necessary funds - estimated to reach at least US \$5 billion — for the needed infrastructure.

Georgia's foreign currency and current accounts in Moscow were frozen by Russia pending settlement of Georgia's share in the former Soviet Union's foreign assets and lia-

bilities. Russia and Georgia have also yet to sign an agreement governing their overall relations and Georgia's access to the rouble zone. Georgia is the only former Soviet republic that has not yet signed such a pact, which the Russian parliament has made contingent on an end to the war against rebels in

"Once we achieve political stability, receive external finance and create a normal banking system, we will be able to resolve many of our problems in less than seven years," says National Bank board member Merab Kakulta.

Abkhazia.

"We are a talented people of free spirits," he adds. "We'll create a new Georgian civilisation in a very short period of time."

Features

Sir, It is the recent political commentaries published in the columns of your esteemed daily written by eminent authors from home and abroad, that surpass the half a century old daily, not to mention the name. But the features of this daily are not less attractive. The features published round the week are, as you have named --Health, Environment, Science and Technology Development, Rising Stars, Living and Women on the Move. An attractive weekend Magazine is published on each Friday. Furthermore, a feature on Education is also published occasionally.

The purpose of this letter is to request you to publish the feature on education more frequently. Now it is well known that education is the key to all types of development. 'Stars' are to rise through gaining knowledge; scientific and technologi-

cal development is the result of both theoretical and applied knowledge; economic development is directly dependent on education; improvement of health depends on health knowledge; environment may be protected through wise living and living may be pleasant in a good environment with educated and wise inmates. For the frequent publication

of the 'education' page, if any of the features is to be curtailed. I think, that may well be the women on the move'. The latter feature is preoccupied with the development stories of the womenfolk in a male dominated society. But writing anything on the women alone does not mean the dominance of the fairsex, instead, it reminds us of their weakness. Although the discrimination between men and women is apparent yet, we are to avoid its recognition day by

day. If the rate of female devel-

opment is more than that of

males, the Development page may focus the phenomenon. Besides, 'Living' cannot be well done by one sex neither man nor woman can live alone. Md. Abdus Sattar Molla

SME, IER, DU

An opportunity

Sir, As you are well aware,

the "Notun Kuri" organised by BTV, is a very competitive event designed to bring out the very best in the young performers. The organisers of this competition must be congratulated for, through this event, they have succeeded in bringing together the top young performers of the country.

But what comes next? Does the BTV or the Government have any schemes to harness the potentialities of the performers? If not, then, in my opinion, the Government should

ual event may be selected for further training. This scheme would help im-

performers, once reaching mamake us appreciate it more.

If we cannot take up the inia golden opportunity wasted.

Renaad Mallick, Gulshan, Dhaka.

take up a scheme whereby the top performers of each individ-

prove our cultural side. The turity, would be better able to represent the cultural aspects of our country abroad. We would be in a better position to show the outside world our rich cultural heritage. And even at home, instead of allowing only one or two performances by the youngsters. BTV can telecast a regular programme featuring these promising artists. This would immensely help stir up interest in our own culture and

tiative now and utilise this vast pool of talent, it would truly be