

AL's New Programme

By all accounts it was an impressive show by the Awami league. Not only in terms of the size of the gathering, but also in terms of organisation, discipline and on-the-spot arrangements last Friday's meeting showed signs of the AL's traditional organising capacity. However, the impact of the meeting was somewhat diluted because of the 'deja vu' nature of most of the programmes that were announced. The only spark of innovation and creativity was contained in the newly announced programme dealing with peasants, under the slogan "Krisnak Bachao-Desh Bachao" (save the peasants, save the country). The timeliness of this programme is beyond question. For quite a while now, national focus has mainly been concentrated on the issues dealing with industry, trade and finance. Agriculture, and by implication the plight of the peasants, did not get the attention that a sector of its size deserves. As experts and policy makers never tire of pointing out, our agriculturists are the largest group of private entrepreneurs, who are silently contributing to GDP without much help from the government. The question of subsidy in agriculture, the prices of agri-products, especially the slump in the paddy prices at the moment, the sudden stoppage of the government's procurement policy, etc. all point to the need for a serious look into the situation of the peasants. We think the AL has done well to pin point this issue. By taking it up as a political platform, the AL will not only be able to put pressure on the government to do something in this area, but also strengthen its support base among the peasants.

As for the rest of AL programmes, there is very little which is new. The repeal of the Indemnity Bill, trial of the killers of Bangabandhu, trial of Golam Azam are old demands which have been re-stated. As the total number of old programmes far outweigh the new, the impression lingers that the AL continues to dwell in the realm of the past, at the cost of a vision for the future.

Demands for removal of corrupt ministers, stopping all sorts of political repression and ending the policy of "dallo karan" (putting party cadres everywhere) have been made before. These accusations would have much greater impact if the media would be supplied with some proof of these claims. Without credible proof, such claims automatically become reduced to irresponsible propaganda, casting doubt on other opposition claims. Credibility and authenticity are critical elements in winning public confidence.

A disturbing aspect of the AL's programmes is the call for hartal in October. What was true when we opposed the SKOP's call for workstoppage is equally, if not more, true for the biggest opposition party. Nothing positive can be achieved by harming the production process. It would be foolish for the AL to get the impression that people participated spontaneously in the hartal of 15 August. While people paid tribute to Bangabandhu, and condemned his assassination, they would have preferred to show their respects in a different manner, given the chance. There is still time. We hope the AL will reconsider its position. When a hartal is observed, the government is hurt only marginally. It is the people, especially the poorest ones, who are hurt most. Hartal or strikes or any form of work stoppage will have to be shunned as a political weapon. What hurts the country, what bleeds the nation, what makes the people poorer, cannot be a part of our politics. People are rejecting it. So should the political parties.

A word of appreciation for the BNP's decision to postpone its meeting is well in order. The spirit of accommodation was refreshing and deserves to be matched by the opposition. We also note with appreciation AL's call upon its workers to avoid violence and clash. This cooperative attitude kept the events of Friday violence free, much to the relief of the citizens of Dhaka, and of the whole country.

Encroachments

Encroachments on public thoroughfares, roads and highways are soon to be dealt with more seriously than ever. The authorities' idea of being stringent rather than lax is to augment the punishment for the offenders against any law or directive. In this case the fine for encroaching on roads etc would be raised from Tk 10 of 1925 — when the Bengal Highways Act was put into force — to Taka 10,000. And for habitual offenders the fine of Tk 100 a day would go on accumulating till the offence ceases. On top of this, if need be simple imprisonment for upto six months may also be awarded. The authorities say in justification of the amendment being brought soon to enhance the punishment, that the penal provisions in the nearly 70-year old Act were totally inadequate today to save the roads from illegal occupation.

This is undoubtedly a welcome move. Encroachment on roads has become a universal evil in Bangladesh. But after duly wishing godspeed to the move we want to know how was the Act put into force in the last two decades? However inadequate the punishment may be, how many were punished?

Our misgivings on this point would be hard to heal. Only stringency of prohibiting laws can do very little unless there is a lot of application of the same — so much as can effectively inhibit the incidence of the offence very naturally. Our lapses on the application side of law, caused largely through a pervasive presence of corruption, have made the question of severity of penal provisions rather pointless.

The amendments could do wonders, if duly enforced. Vast areas of public property, forming parts of roads and highways, have been occupied, permanently it seems and all over Bangladesh, to be added to personal holdings either for housing or for commercial purposes or both. The job is to bring these innumerable plots and stretches back to public ownership and put these to collective good.

Will the government be able to do that? In the case of railway property, government has failed miserably to offset large-scale encroachment. How will they succeed this time? The bad records all the more demand from us all the good wishes for the latest move to succeed.

Is the vision of an United States of Europe fading away?

The recent disarray among the members of the European Economic Community has raised doubts about the future of the most ambitious plan for integration ever attempted in history. Not only the news media but even people in authority in the capitals of the member countries have started to question whether the goal of one European currency, let alone the much more radical final objective of political and economic union envisaged in the Maastricht treaty, can be achieved in the foreseeable future. The reason for this pessimism is the crumbling edifice of the understanding between France and Germany. Indeed, the Franco-German axis was the bed rock on which the EEC structure was erected. Countries such as the UK or Italy are no doubt important in other ways but the very existence and the future of the Community hinges on the close cooperation and friendship between France and Germany, two countries for which centuries of enmity, war and bitterness was swept away in the spirit of reconciliation as Europe rose from the ashes of the Second World War.

The friction between France and Germany has taken a serious turn recently. The reasons are essentially economic though the political undertones are easily discernible. The economic priorities of the two countries are too divergent to be reconciled. Battered by the impact of a global recession and high domestic unemployment, France has been pressing for interest rate cuts in order to stimulate the economy, whereas Germany is determined to prevent inflation and therefore, refuses to reduce its interest rate. German fear of inflation is most deep-rooted. Perhaps the memories of the hyper inflation which spawned Hitler and Nazism still haunts them. The absorption of East Germany into the economy has severely strained the German economy. The huge costs of unification were met primarily through borrowing. Naturally the Bundesbank had to raise the interest rates to punishing levels. Given the need to maintain exchange rate parities within the

Europe: History in the Making

I do not believe however that the alarmists are right in writing EC off or consigning the Maastricht treaty to the category of failed enterprises. Viewed objectively, the European Community has already achieved remarkable success in laying the foundation of a common economic and political system.

bands specified under the agreements to move toward European Monetary Union (EMU), central banks of other members of the European Monetary System were forced to also raise interest rates. The cost of having the Deutsch Mark (DM) as the anchor currency of the European Monetary System (EMS) quickly became clear. With the exception of the Netherlands the other member countries, but particularly the UK and France found it impossible to follow Germany's lead without further aggravating recession and unemployment. Le Monde in an editorial said, "All of Europe is paying today for the mistakes committed by the Bonn Government during German unification." The new Germany, the paper complained, "has abused its dominant economic position on the Continent."

A major step towards European economic integration had been taken in 1979, when the members of the European Community, under the leadership of French President Valery Giscard d'Estaing and German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt signed the treaty establishing the European Monetary System. Since then, despite many stresses and strains, the EEC members have tried to observe the rules of the common exchange rate mechanism (ERM). In fact, the visionaries of an United Europe who drafted the Maastricht treaty, wanted a single common currency by the end of the decade. This goal received a severe jolt recently when, in the face of severe speculative pressure on the French franc, the Bundesbank refused to budge from its position of high interest rate. Currency speculators unloaded French franc in huge amounts thereby reducing its exchange value against German mark, despite massive intervention by European central banks. Speculators correctly perceived that the political costs of main-

taining the existing parities was becoming unacceptable. Moreover the self fulfilling nature of a large and sustained speculative attack, and the inability of central banks to hold these parities, had been clearly demonstrated at the time of sterling's forced exit from the ERM last September. This affected the other European currencies as well and undermined the entire system of currency stabilization, and derailed the entire process of the gradual narrowing of the currency bands. As a result EC officials were forced to widen the range of currency fluctuations to 30 percent (15 percent up and 15 per cent down). This was just a face-saving device because as a

summer of 1991 the Germans recognized the seceding states of Croatia and Slovenia. The Germans have a certain historical kinship with the Croats and did not want either of these small nations to go under the control of Serbia. France and Britain have argued that the early recognition of these countries by Germany precipitated the ensuing struggle to grab territory belonging to the Bosnian Muslims. Quite apart from the merit of these arguments it is quite that the EC policy on Bosnia, under French and British influence, differed from that pursued by Germany. The Germans are no longer content to remain a minor actor in the political field. They

have raised serious doubts about its ultimate fate. Denmark was the first country to initially reject it in a national referendum. Though it subsequently approved it by a narrow margin, it was clear that even a small nation like Denmark found the goal of political and monetary union too much to swallow. Britain has had a longstanding ambivalence about its place in Europe. The British parliament has ratified the treaty but a significant number of the MPs and vast number of people in the country are not convinced that they are ready to take such a giant step in subordinating national sovereignty to a collective European entity. The fundamental change in the political map of Europe has also raised new questions. Eastern European nations were viewed in the past in an adversarial context but this is no longer valid. Germany, for example, feels closer to Poland as well as other bordering countries in the east than some of the existing EC members. Some of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries such as Switzerland and Sweden have altered their stance and are seeking membership of the group. All this is changing the original vision of the founding fathers who wanted a compact and homogeneous group of nations anchored by Franco-German friendship.

The growing strain in the relation between these nations due to monetary, economic and political rifts has begun to cast a shadow on the future of the Community. Increasing disenchantment with the EC bureaucracy and the plethora of detailed and difficult to interpret regulations produced by them is another negative factor. The huge size of the bureaucracy in Brussels and its propensity to arrogate to itself authority to regulate the economies of member countries at the cost of national parliaments is also causing second

thoughts about the whole issue. Admittedly the pace of integration of the Community will slow down as a result of the current difficulties. I do not believe however that the alarmists are right in writing EC off or consigning the Maastricht treaty to the category of failed enterprises. Viewed objectively, the European Community has already achieved remarkable success in laying the foundation of a common economic and political system. Western Europe of today is a vastly different place from what it was before the Treaty of Rome was signed in 1970. Gone are the custom barriers or the passport controls or the restrictions on currency movements or on intra-community investment. It is a vast common market within which goods and services can move freely as they do within the national boundary of a country.

Equally important, the institutional structures for ensuring coordination and cooperation are already in place. The European Parliament is not yet exactly a sovereign body but its growing prestige and authority is unquestionable. Harmonization of the national policies of 12 countries with different and often conflicting perceptions of national interests has not been an easy task. Yet the group has persevered.

Jack Delors' vision might have been a bit premature for some countries but no one has yet said that the goal is unrealistic or unattainable. Some adjustment will be necessary to accommodate the reality of Germany's disproportionate economic clout but eventually Germany will have to accept a place in the new Europe. In the context of the Community, France may have to abandon its dream of "grandeur" which inspired de Gaulle but who can deny France its rightful place as a great nation? My assessment of the latest situation in Europe is that despite the stresses and strains the forces for integration set in motion may slow down for short periods but it can neither be stopped nor its course altered. History always moves forward and what we are witnessing in Europe is history in the making.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

result of the decision the EMS is now virtually dead. This very negative development came just when the last major hurdle to the Maastricht treaty was removed by the approval by the British Parliament to the treaty. No one really knows for certain if the goal of a single currency for Europe will be achieved, as planned or even in the near future.

Franco-German discord is not confined to the monetary question alone. In the field of trade the two countries seem to have growing differences in dealing with their major trading partners. For example, recently the Germans ignored EC rules to purchase US telecommunications equipment in preference to the bidders from the Community. Naturally the Americans offered them, in return, certain special advantages. There are other examples of the widening position of the two nations in the area of trade. In the political field the rift has become visible when the Bosnian crisis unfolded. In the

resent the fact that despite their dominant economic position in Europe, it is France and Britain who are veto-wielding permanent members of the UN Security Council. Germany, as the defeated power of the second World War is excluded from that elite group. The United States has in recent years started to support the German aspiration for permanent membership, advocating the inclusion of both Germany and Japan on the grounds of their importance in the global economy. Out of five permanent members, Europe already has three (Russia has to be taken as an European country though as Soviet Union it may have had a different status). Obviously it would be inequitable for Europe to have another member, and both Britain and France are fearful that either one of them might lose the veto power which has symbolized their status as world powers.

The slow and halting manner in which the Maastricht treaty was ratified by the EC countries

has raised serious doubts about its ultimate fate. Denmark was the first country to initially reject it in a national referendum. Though it subsequently approved it by a narrow margin, it was clear that even a small nation like Denmark found the goal of political and monetary union too much to swallow. Britain has had a longstanding ambivalence about its place in Europe. The British parliament has ratified the treaty but a significant number of the MPs and vast number of people in the country are not convinced that they are ready to take such a giant step in subordinating national sovereignty to a collective European entity. The fundamental change in the political map of Europe has also raised new questions. Eastern European nations were viewed in the past in an adversarial context but this is no longer valid. Germany, for example, feels closer to Poland as well as other bordering countries in the east than some of the existing EC members. Some of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries such as Switzerland and Sweden have altered their stance and are seeking membership of the group. All this is changing the original vision of the founding fathers who wanted a compact and homogeneous group of nations anchored by Franco-German friendship.

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South Asia in Transition: Challenges and Choices — II

Perception should Shift from Arms Build-up to Strengthening of Relations

by Muhammad Shamsul Huq

THE arms build-up in South Asia was boosted primarily by four factors: (i) the adversarial relationship between India and Pakistan that triggered three armed conflicts between them, (ii) unresolved border dispute between China and India sparking a war in 1962, (iii) Pakistan's defence alliance with USA, reinforced subsequently during 1970's by the formation of Pakistan-China-US axis, (iv) India-USSR entente though initially unstructured maturing into a stable and dependable relationship and culminating into a "Peace and Friendship Treaty" in August 1971 as a shield against Sino-Pakistan-US entente.

US-Pakistan entente was viewed differently by US and Pakistan. The former saw it as a part of her global strategy in containing the USSR. The latter saw it as a shield against India though at no time there was any assurance to that effect from the US. The divergent view points surfaced clearly when in the wake of the Sino-India armed conflict in 1962, military aid poured into India from both the US and the USSR.

The 1970's and 1980's were decades of rapid military build-up in South Asia. The wars India fought with Pakistan and China provided the rationale for strengthening and modernization of Indian armed forces. Between 1970 and 1980 Indian annual defence expenditure practically doubled in real terms and exceeded \$8 bn by 1991. India imported a wide

variety of new weapons for all services mainly from the USSR, but also from the United Kingdom and France. Pakistan followed suit and began to modernize her military forces in the 1970's and procured weapons from China and France after the US military assistance started dwindling in the 1970's. The cold war proved to be of immense benefit to Pakistan during the Russian military intrusion into Afghanistan. American military and economic assistance rose to a new high level and included sophisticated F-16's, harpoon missiles and a variety of other weapons. Her defence expenditure rose to \$3.23 bn in 1991. Indian response could be seen in a further doubling of her military expenditure between 1980 and 1988. India expanded the strength of her armed forces and procured new Soviet fighters and attack air-crafts and other sophisticated weapons including a nuclear submarine from the Soviet Union on lease.

The arms race in the South Asian region acquired a new and alarming dimension with India and Pakistan reportedly having developed nuclear capability. They are regarded by

analysts of global arsenal as undeclared nuclear-weapon states and the probable number of weapons in their possession is estimated at 2500 in India and 300 in Pakistan. The missile "Agni" developed by India is capable of flying about 2,200 miles far enough to hit Beijing. It is, however, claimed to be an "R&D vehicle" and not a weapons system. Pakistan has also acquired some missiles from China capable of flying upto 300 miles far enough to hit New Delhi.

Challenges and Choices

The leaders of the South Asian nations face many challenges. (i) The most formidable among them is to take a bold new step in redefining their categories of thinking on the entire spectrum of their security perceptions with a paradigm shift from external to domestic security threats, from confrontation to cooperation and from differences to communalities. (ii) Another important challenge is psycho-historic in character and calls for the liberation of the nations of the region from the vicious trap of history,

asymmetry and geo-politics and security perceptions of a big-ego era, which cloud their vision of the new horizon in interstate relations. This is achievable through a logical analysis of the dynamics of the changing regio-strategic scenario and the over-arching global trend of détente and cooperation. (iii) The challenge presented by the nuclear capability of India and Pakistan can be met if the nuclear agreement already reached by them not to attack each other's nuclear installations is broadened to include a commitment renouncing the use of their nuclear capability against each other or any other country in the region. (iv) The new era of knowledge-based property has already heralded a change in the very concept and structure of security with the top priority assigned to the human and economic content of security and development. Besides Japan, a number of other Asian countries have also profited immensely from this shift reflected in their defence and development policies.

Singapore, Republic of Korea, Taiwan and Malaysia are notable among them. (v) With the

end of the cold war and the removal of the security threat posed by the erstwhile Soviet Union, the US and her European allies are already engaged in rearranging the order of their priorities.

(vi) It may not, therefore, be realistic to expect any significant increase in the flow of aid to the developing countries. As a matter of fact, external assistance to developing countries had already been dwindling and a positive flow of \$42.06 billion in 1981 was reversed to a negative flow of \$32.05 billion in 1988.

(vii) The situation is compounded by the fact that in theory the industrial capitalist countries are committed to the market economy. But, in fact, the free operation of market forces has been blocked by tariff and non-tariff barriers. The impact of the decision at the G-7 summit recently held in Tokyo on the elimination of tariff barriers is yet to be seen. In the meantime, the countries in the South Asian region would be prudent to act in concert in addressing the problem of their structural dependence on the economies of the industrial

countries and the acceleration of their progress towards a self-reliant economy.

Regional Cooperation: the SAARC

Regional cooperation appears to be the most appropriate strategy in meeting these common challenges and, in the process, build a neighbourhood friendly environment. A framework of regional cooperation based on the proposal mooted by the late President Ziaur Rahman is already available for the South Asian countries, known as the "South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation" (SAARC).

Many countries of the world are in the throes of the stirring of a new life. World economic configuration is undergoing a transformation with a revolution in information and communication systems, prospective integration of the European Community, closer cooperative links between East and West Europe and the move for formation of a Pacific Community.

Let us hope that under the able and wise leadership of the new chairperson Prime Minister Begum Khaleida Zia, the SAARC, embracing a fifth of world's population and founded on a shared rich cultural heritage, will become vibrant with action and succeed in unleashing the creativity of the peoples of the region and, through their concerted action, in raising the quality of their life so to earn for them a place of dignity and honour within the international community. (Concluded)

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.

Institute of Law & Int'l Affairs

Sir, The Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs was established in June, 1972 with the object of serving as a forum devoted mainly to the promotion of study and research in law and international affairs. It has, among its patrons and members, eminent personages, including judges, lawyers, jurists, academics.

The mainstay of its finance rests on grants made by the Ministry of Law and Justice and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Lately the institute has been facing an uncertain future reportedly owing to withholding of its share of grant by the Ministry of Law and Justice from the last financial year. No clear indication is available as to why the ministry has withheld its grant but it is believed that the institute has fallen victim to friction of political ideology which came to the surface following the last Annual

General Meeting of the Institute. The institute cannot run with the grant of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs alone. It is reported that the employees of the institute could not be paid their salary during the last few months for paucity of funds.

It will be a sad thing if for want of patronage from one of the sponsoring ministries, the institute is forced to close down. A well-wisher of the Institute

Citizen's harassment

Sir, A couple of months ago, I bought a second hand car, and had the same duly transferred in my name after the necessary formalities which includes a court affidavit both on the part of the seller and buyer. Just the other day, I was waiting at a car tailoring shop while the seats were being repaired. A traffic constable came up, demanded to know the owner of my car, and when I volunteered, I was informed that there was a case against my car for an al-

leged offence in 1991. When I told him that I was not the owner at that time, and moreover why the search after long two years, the cop replied that it was not possible for him to look around for all these years, and now that he has traced it, the car must be taken to police station for which he produced a "car seizure" warrant signed by a magistrate, dated some time 1992. He could not even specify the nature of the offence. The policeman claimed that as per law the present owner, irrespective of his ownership at the time, of the alleged offence will have to face the music. About the subsequent events the less elaborated the better, and ultimately I was penalised for something with which I had absolutely nothing to do in any manner whatsoever.

Under the circumstance, I beseech clarification as a citizen from the relevant authorities as to the exact legal position in this situation.

Is a person liable for any alleged offence of the previous owner of which he is ignorant? When a car is transferred in favour of a new owner by BRTA isn't it deemed to be cleared of all encumbrances? If not so why is not the new owner warned to this effect?

Can a policeman walk up to an unwary new car owner and demand to have his car seized for some alleged offence not un-

der his ownership and that too after a lapse of two years? Here the question arises whether a warrant is issued for an inanimate object like a car, or its owner at the time of the offence. Am I wrong to assert that one of my fundamental rights as a citizen is not to be penalised or punished for any offence not committed by me?

Will someone tell me, how I am to defend myself in such similar situation in future.

Dr. Mahmudur Rahman
Dhaka.

Highway accidents

Sir, The traffic accident on Dhaka-Chittagong highway in which several wage-earners on home leave were killed, was tragic and condoled by all. Now is the time we must pause to think what can be done to reduce the number of highway accidents.

Recently, I travelled to Chittagong by bus and was impressed by the good quality of the road surface where the renovation work has been completed. This induces a driver to drive faster. All over the country the roads are being upgraded for better communication. So I think the state of affairs is same everywhere. I noticed that the road being of two-lane only, the

vehicles were going over to the wrong lane frequently to pass parked buses and trucks or slow moving rickshaws/carts. The situation is potentially dangerous and only God's mercy keeps the number of accidents at the level that are reported. The Dhaka-Chittagong highway will become more risky after the Daudkandi bridge is completed when the heavy vehicle/drivers would rush for more trips per day (there being no waiting for ferries).

The authorities may consider the practicality of a few suggestions to improve the situation. Rickshaws and local traffics should be discouraged, if possible, from using the highway. Designated places, in the highways, should be indicated for the stoppage of buses, trucks and cars. The signs should be comprehensible to the illiterate drivers and repeated several times from a distance of, say, 2 km. The last resort is to construct 'islands' at risk-prone places.

MA Haq
Green Road, Dhaka.

Man and animal

Sir, Recent news reports from New Zealand have it that a potentially lethal parasite has been discovered in a human for the first time. The parasite, trichinella pseudospiralis, was

previously thought to occur only in wild animals. The researchers have described this discovery as a matter of international significance. What was once to be found only in wild animals, is now being noticed also in man!

Of course, man is the wildest and the crudest of all animals with a gentleman-like facade. Thousands of stories bear testimony to this assertion. The discovery is a pointer to the fact again. Time is not far off when man's teeth and nails will come out with all ferocity and man will shed his mask and turn wild totally!

Arman Shahryar
Kazla, Rajshahi

CLARIFICATION
Some readers have pointed out that in the interview feature with Sayeed Ahmad, published in the last Weekend Magazine, it has been inadvertently stated that Ahmad "has worked in several ministerial posts." The playwright held a number of positions as senior civil servant in several ministries, before retiring from the government service. However, he never assumed the position of a minister. The error is regretted.

Editor
Weekend Magazine Section