

Lessons from Pakistan

In a bold and far-reaching move, the government of Pakistan has decreed, that unless candidates to the forthcoming election in Pakistan clear their overdue bank loans, they will not be allowed to contest. In this connection, the government has authorised the Pakistan Banking Council to publish the names of all those whose outstanding loans amount to Rs 1 million (US \$33,300) or more.

While a question remains as to whether or not such a sweeping disclosure violates the bank-client relationship of confidentiality, yet the move must have received a general reaction of welcome in Pakistan. This has to be so because, in the recent past, banks in Pakistan have not been allowed to operate on professional lines, and had come under undue political pressure and interference.

The disclosure of the names of loan defaulters has rocked the Pakistani political scene. On the face of it, the move may appear to have been directed at the Pakistan People's Party, especially against the Bhutto family. Benazir, her husband, Asif Zardari, and her mother Nusrat, have all been named as having huge outstanding bank loans. Benazir, one of the top contenders for the Prime Minister's post, took the loan for her party paper *Mussawat*. It was not a personal business loan, which save, her from blemish, somewhat.

Much to the relief of the other contender's camp, Nawaz Sharif was found to be clear on this score. However, his brother and some other members of his cabinet have been included in the list. So, while Benazir may try to give a political overtone to the list as disclosed, deeper scrutiny will reveal that there was perhaps no such motive.

We in Bangladesh find the move in Pakistan to be a lesson worth learning from. In our own country there have been serious instances of bank loans not being repaid, and the defaulters getting away without receiving any punishment. The basic question is of accountability — both financial and political. Normally, banks can handle their clients, even the delinquent ones. Problems begin when the political powers of the day start interfering with the banking process. The result is something we are familiar with.

Good governance necessitates that our politicians must be above board regarding all questions of money and use of power. In this regard when the autocratic government was toppled, all the three alliances gave a pledge that when they go to power, they will take some effective steps to prevent their politicians from making money on the job. One such step to which all political parties, including the BNP, pledged, was to publicly declare, at the time of assumption of office, the assets and liabilities of all those who will occupy ministerial posts. This declaration was to be compared with a second assessment, when the term would end. This measure is one of many that BNP government was pledged-bound to institute. We would like to know why this measure was not followed through, and what, if any, are the government's thoughts on this subject.

The example set by Pakistan is worthy of emulation. We can perhaps already make it known that any aspirants to elective posts will have to have a 'clean bill of health' from the banks they do business with. Can we expect our major political parties to pledge that they will not give important party posts to loan defaulters, and those who already occupy such posts, run the risk of losing them unless they clean up their financial act.

People are crying out for measures that will lead to good and clean government. Will we have the good sense to take them?

Roaring Private Practice for Educators

The Kishoreganj correspondent of The Daily Star must have thought he was going to make a revelation when he sent in the despatch titled 'Private Tutoring Now a Commercial Practice' and published in his journal on Sunday. What did his colleagues on the news desk of the daily think when making of it a double column prominent news of the day?

The news from Kishoreganj, in summary, is as follows: In the town as well as all the 12 thanas of the district primary, secondary and college teachers do not apply themselves wholly while in the classroom. All the students as such need badly to hire those same teachers outside of the schools to make the class lessons complete. The well-off guardians have the choicest pick of such teachers and this adds both to their status as elite and to the success of their progeny in the exams. Science teachers are in such demand that they tutor the pupils by batches. Teachers of English and accountancy also coach by batches. All students taking practical exams in subjects like chemistry, physics, biology etc must, at pain of miserable showing, engage those taking the respective classes.

In Kishoreganj, the correspondent assures us, all these errant teachers are paid 'handsomely'. We are convinced that the Kishoreganj-dated story could be used as a report on the pedagogical situation in Dhaka without changing a word. The report would of course be more objective if it were qualified that the situation in the capital city was worse a hundred times over. And here this is such a familiar day-to-day fact of life that no one sees anything wrong in it.

Private tutoring by droves and coaching centres running more as dens minting money — are two products of the recent innovations in school teaching and educational administration. The whole thing has been stood on its head — the millennia-old pyramid of quality with the best making the apex and the mediocre forming the bulging body with the bottom touching the ground of unsuccessfuls at its broadest spread — has for the first time in the history of mankind been forced into a complete inversion. The teachers' sweatshops and the students' coaching dens and the educational dispensation of the state have combined to make education yield hefty benefits to all three. At whose cost? Precisely at the cost of the nation's future, at the cost of our whole posterity. How will our generations yet to come face a world of tough competition after the nation has been swept clean by these quarters of knowledge and skill, imagination and intellectual quality?

HAVING been around the world a little bit, I would say that people mostly consider that they have no more than four seasons in a year — winter, spring, summer and autumn — well, may be you would prefer a different order of precedence. Some people think that they have as few as only two seasons in the year — just wet and dry. We, in this country, boast of as many as six seasons in a year — *grish's ha* (summer, dry) *barsha* (rainy, wet) *sharat* (pre-autumn) *hemanta* (autumn) *sheet* (winter) and *basanta* (spring). Of all the six, *sharat* looks like a season exclusive to this region. I am not sure if it should be called pre-autumn or post-rainy season. According to the calendar, *sharat's* reign lasts two months, beginning the first day of *bhadra*. This year, the day fell on August 16. So, we are just into the season.

First, about the flower *she-fali* or, *sheuly*, as it is also called. Many traditionalists consider this flower the harbinger of the new season. The plant bearing the flower lives for years — rising to medium-height. It's rather a small flower, white petals growing round a deep-orange stem. The plant comes out in a profusion of flowers, each one of them standing separate in its niche from the others. Coming to full bloom in the evening, all the flowers combine to waft through air their sweet, light scent around during the night. Alas, the flowers live for a short while only. Nearly all of them would drop before the night is over and in the morning, you can hardly see the ground un-

der the tree for layer upon layer of flowers. Next evening, fresh buds would blossom — so on, well into autumn. Incidentally, the flower has an economic use too. Even now, many housewives dry the stems of the flower for later use as a fragrant colouring substance for food items — as a poor man's saffron really!

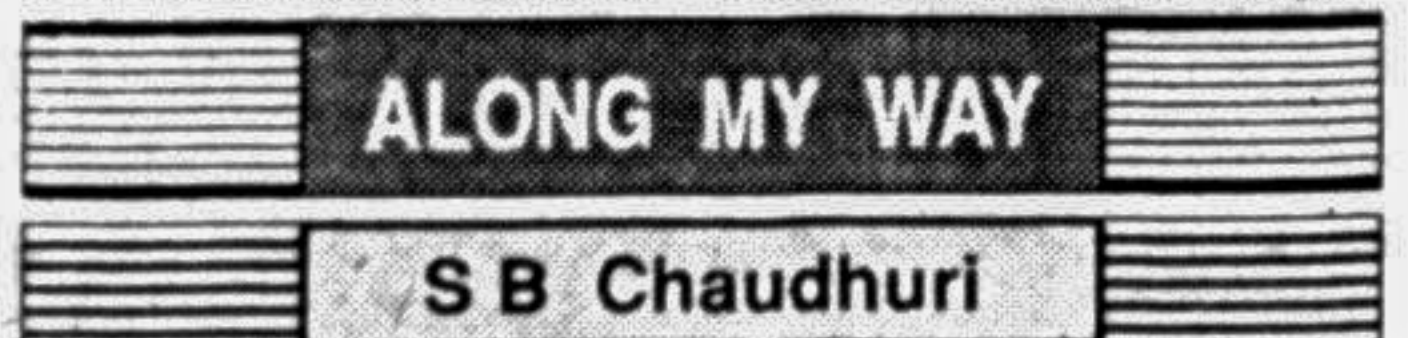
Vast fields of *shapla*, our national flower, would bloom on the wide expanses of water on the wet-lands brought about by the rains in earlier months. And, long strands of *shapla* stem, tied up into neat round bundles, the flower peeking out at one end, would appear on the city markets — to be consumed as a vegetable — a relatively cheap one at that.

Sharat also coincides with perhaps the greatest festival of the Hindu community in this region — the *Durga Puja*. Some even call the occasion the *sharad-utshab* — literally, the festival of the *sharat* season. Ideally, *sharat* should manifest itself in deep blue sky, as if the rains of the past months have washed the canopy clean of all dirt. The air would seem purer. The sun's rays would cut a direct path through the atmosphere, make *tal*, the tough nuts of our tall palm trees, to ripen. Not that the clouds would disappear altogether. They would come floating by under a serene blue sky and drop welcome showers, now and then. Not the long torrential downpours of the rainy season. Once in a while, you would even enjoy the rare sight of rains falling while the sun shines in the upper sky.

Alas, *sharat* can be capri-

cious too and bring floods. Of course, it's possible to blame it all on monsoon which encroaches on *sharat*. Even as I write this piece, parts of the country are in the grip of floods. Rains come down in torrents, as if we are still in the months of *Ashar* and *Sraban*. The devastating floods of 1987 and 1988 make you wary of the onset of *sharat* and you also remember the Flood Action Plan (FAP).

The total cost of FAP had been estimated initially between ten and fifteen billion US dollars! The initial phase will run into 1995. The World Bank (WB), Asian Development Bank



(ADB), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), European Economic Community (EEC) and eleven donor countries had pledged support to FAP. The eleven individual donor countries are Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Holland, Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, UK and the USA. Designed as a long-term flood control programme, FAP is coordinated by the government and WB. It comprises of eleven plan components and fifteen supporting activities. A Flood Plan Coordination Organisation (EPCO) has been set up to carry out studies and supporting activities, scheduled to be completed by 1995. Understandably, FAP is overwhelmingly dependent on the support of the donor community. However, reports have appeared in the press of late, suggesting that donors who had earlier contributed generously for FAP studies and supporting activities, are no longer as enthusiastic as before in extending financial support to the programme.

To go by these reports, serious controversies have now surfaced which question the very foundation as well strategies of the FAP on grounds of its possible impact on the environment, ecology and the society. It is also being alleged that the plan lacks people's partici-

must be obtained before their future is changed irrevocably. Critics have also questioned the effectiveness of embankments to contain flood waters. Sudden river shifts, they argue, will soon make a flop of the embankment system. By way of an example from the immediate past, they cite the recent flap over the embankments near the Meghna bridge. Experts on the other side are not visibly impressed by this argument. Conceding that total control of flood was neither possible nor desirable, they feel that an embankment system was the only effective mechanism to mitigate flood and confine it to an optimal level. They also point out that the FAP is in pre-feasibility stage and environmental issues are being dovetailed into the action plan. These experts also say that FAP is perhaps the lone instance among WB supported projects from around the world where people's participation was taking place.

These are the days of heightened awareness of environmental issues. It's not surprising that the whiff of a suspicion of causing environmental degradation could prompt donors to shy away from supporting a project. The June 24 resolutions of the European Parliament, calling upon the EC member-states to reconsider their involvement in the FAP before going for any major constructions, bear testimony to that. The recent visit of a German parliamentary delegation also has been linked to the donor communities' concern over possible environmental degradation in the country because of the FAP.

At stake is the untold miseries of millions of people and the colossal loss of resources caused by recurring floods. Critics of the FAP profess that they are not against it. What they want, they say, is a collective decision and an acceptable solution to problems. However, no viable alternative to the FAP embankment system for mitigating floods has emerged yet. Critics are calling for hasty action on FAP to be avoided. Meanwhile, climatologists are predicting destructive floods and heavier monsoon rains in the future. This is what they said at an international workshop held in Dhaka last June.

All that money needed make FAP look a bit unreal. Analysts believe that with the FAP regional studies nearing completion, the plan was approaching crossroads when final choices would have to be made about the strategy for flood mitigation and water management. This also provides an opportunity to try for national consensus on a totally non-political issue.

DURING 1988 floods, small flat-bottomed wooden boats invaded Dhaka streets. Crawling along the Motifheel thoroughfare in a vintage jeep, the sight of a boat scuttling among rickshaws being pulled by the saddle and handle-bar in knee-deep water would bring a sense of unreality at times. Seeing last week the streets of the city getting submerged in water and the rains coming down in sheets this time of the year, I would hasten to acknowledge *sharat* as the season of floods too.

A Proposed Pacific Rim Summit Worries ASEAN

IN his first official visit to Asia in early July, US President Bill Clinton reaffirmed his country's commitment to the region by inviting leaders of Pacific Rim nations to an informal summit in Seattle later this year.

But far from being reassuring, the gesture has made some South-east Asian countries uncomfortable, reviving regional divisions as well as suspicions about US intentions in the region.

The differences stem from contrasting strategies for advancing the political and economic interests of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the post-Cold War world, where old familiar power balances seemed to have come unhinged and trade frictions threaten to cleave the global economy into rival blocs.

The proposed Seattle summit coincides with a gathering of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in the US city and will raise the 15-member grouping to the head-of-government level. For the first time, it will also bring together a large number of Asia-Pacific leader.

By upgrading the Seattle meeting to a summit, political analysts say Clinton is hoping to use the four-year-old APEC as the basis for his vision of an integrated Asia-Pacific economic community.

But he has also revived regional opposition to APEC, particularly among ASEAN members who support Malaysia's proposal to form an East Asian trade forum excluding the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

Although the ASEAN has since endorsed APEC during a meeting of its foreign ministers in Singapore, it did the same

with the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC), which Washington suspect is seeking to establish an East Asian trade bloc.

ASEAN members have also yet to confirm their attendance of the summit. But Malaysian premier Mahathir Mohamad remains adamant in his decision to boycott it.

"The convening of such a conference would make (APEC) a formal regional trading group, one which Malaysia would not welcome," said Mahathir.

Malaysia considers APEC as an Australian invention to keep the Asian markets open. Kuala Lumpur has remained unconvinced about it because it brings together three regions — North America, North-east Asia and South-east Asia — whose interests may not always be compatible.

EAEC, meanwhile, is considered a more organic entity (some have called it a 'Non-Caucasian Caucus' for keeping out North America, Australia and New Zealand) and a more logical expression of East Asia's fast-growing and integrating economies.

The United States is current chair of APEC, which groups the ASEAN's six member countries with Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

"There is the suspicion that (Washington) is very cynically using the APEC for its own ends, that its ultimate intention is to divide and weaken East Asia and thus strengthen the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)," said Bunn Negara of the Institute for Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) here.

Other analysts say

Washington is using APEC as a means to penetrate the international economy. University of Malaysia international relations professor Lee Poh Ping said Clinton's summit call shows Washington "does not want to miss out on global trade, particularly in Asia."

The economies of APEC account for half the world's output and 40 percent of global trade. And the East Asian economies are the fastest growing in the world.

But the idea of bringing leaders together in a formalised setting does not appeal to a region wary of committing itself to official positions, concessions and agreements. ASEAN itself has had only four summit meetings at leadership level since its founding in 1967.

"Whether justified or not," said Negara, "ASEAN suspects

Surrender of Pakistan Army

Dr Nizamuddin Ahmed Associate Professor Department of Architecture, BUET, Dhaka

In August 1991 Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia had formed a national committee on this valuable minerals — 'black gold' — of Cox's Bazar. The Committee members submitted their report to the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources about a year ago but unfortunately nothing has been heard on the matter so far.

We feel that it is not possible on the part of the government to deal with this 'black-gold' of Cox's Bazar single handedly. It is therefore requested that, in the greater interest of the country, an all-party national committee may be formed to look into the matter and to en-

criticised Jakarta's human rights record during his Tokyo trip. Said Julius Caesar Parrenas of the Manila-based Centre for Research and Communications: "Clinton treated (Suharto) very shabbily."

Still, there is little sympathy for Mahathir, largely because the Malaysian leader has tended to pre-empt ASEAN consultations. The latest example was Mahathir's announcement of his decision to boycott the APEC summit even before the ASEAN foreign ministers could gather in Singapore in mid-July.

Malaysia's planned exclusion of non-Asian powers is also opposed by the likes of Singapore, which aims to engage rather than estrange the United States. Anxious that Washington may just pull out of Asia, the prosperous city state is pushing for "a balance of power framework in which the United States plays a leading role," wrote Lau Teik Soon of Singapore's National University in a recent paper.

But fearful about where growing global trade tensions will lead to, ASEAN has agreed to pursue the idea of setting up the EAEC. The big debate is now is on where to base it.

Indonesia wants to make the EAEC an East Asian lobby group within APEC, arguing this would be the most effective way for the region to promote its interests within the larger grouping.

Malaysia favours making the EAEC a part of the ASEAN economic ministers' annual meeting. Said a Jakarta-based ASEAN official: "Mahathir seems intent on capitalising on the diplomatic gains that ASEAN has scored in recent years."

The group's programme to create an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) within 15 years is the region's most ambitious economic integration agreement so far.

ASEAN is also enhancing its political and economic clout by laying the ground for Russia and China to fully participate in its security dialogue and by preparing the way for eventual inclusion of the Indochinese states in the grouping.

Commented Parrenas: "That would make ASEAN a grouping with a combined population of more than 400 million and a combined GDP close to that of China."

OPINION Rhetorics against FAP

K B S Rasheed

The Flood Action Plan, in recent months, has become a serious topic of discussion among professionals and educated laymen alike. And predictably, some have emerged as active critics of the whole plan — pointing out a myriad of claims that the FAP would do more harm than good. In any scheme, especially in one as big as the FAP, criticisms, reviews and suggestions are welcome and desirable since they help to single out the potential or latent constraints and disbenefits which might have escaped the scrutiny of the scheme's authors. After all, candid debate is the hallmark of intellectual solvency. But, regrettably, the criticisms lashed out against the FAP have become acrimonious — moreover, they are short on facts and long on rhetorics.

The FAP has been conceived and authored, after extensive deliberations, by experienced experts. It is a comprehensive water management strategy for the country, and millions of Bangladeshis — poor and impoverished, whose lives and property are threatened by recurrent floods — would welcome with open arms flood mitigation measures under the Plan. It is a misfortune that most of the criticisms of the anti-FAP activists are either out of context or vague or both. In fact, all the sectors in which the critics accuse the FAP of default, the FAP has already dealt with them in one or the other of its 26 components — although the level of emphasis, in some cases, might vary due to pragmatic considerations. For someone living in a cushy (and dry) ambience, it is idle to talk of 'living with flood', but to him/her, in whose house and land, flood waters enter and stay, the event is a predicament. The latter expects technology to save him/her — just as anyone else in the world wishes to better the quality of life through technological inno-

One other sector in which the anti-FAP activists lambast

the FAP is that the latter has been impervious to, or ignored, the needs, perceptions and problems of the beneficiaries of the flood mitigation schemes. This criticism does not hold ground at all because the FAP has categorically identified in its objectives the process of people's participation in the projects — from the planning to operation and maintenance stages. Indeed, the FPCO prepared a 'Guidelines for People's Participation' this year which sets out, in detail, the stages of cooperation and continuous dialogue between the resource managers and the resource users, i.e., beneficiary groups. Yet another topic of criticism is the pilot compartmentalization project in Tangail and Sirajganj. The criticism, in this case, is the result of misinformation and aversion to innovative planning. The compartmentalization concept is one of controlled flooding — in which the benefits accrued from inundation are balanced against flood damages in order to optimise the water management dividends. And the pilot project is designed to test and verify the viability and efficacy of this concept. Besides, the pilot project — since it is an innovative and indigenous enterprise — has rightly sought to involve the local people in planning, design, operation and maintenance.

The bottomline of my argument is that the FAP authors have addressed comprehensively almost all the facets of flood management in the country. Many of us might have different views or suggestions on nuances or modalities, and the anti-FAP activists can help the FAP authors by presenting their case in an articulate form, which is not vague, and is based on facts. When debate and dialogue are factually correct and are devoid of rhetorics and rancour, the end product is always strong and solid.

(The writer is faculty member of Dhaka University)

To the Editor...

Bangladeshi volunteers from Cambodia

Str, May I make a suggestion for articles in the English and Bangla press?

Recently four ex-NGO workers from Bangladesh (ADAB, Comilla Proshika, CMES) who were volunteers in Cambodia in the election building process have returned to Bangladesh. As you probably know there were also Bangladeshis from the Election Commission and Army there.

In my opinion these people are heroes who successfully helped Cambodia have a democratic election, and they also have fascinating stories to tell. I hope you agree their stories are worth reporting.

Richard Holloway
Pack/Prip
Dhaka.

National committee on valuable minerals

Sir, Since independence our successive governments have failed to utilise the valuable minerals 'black-gold' of Cox's Bazar economically for reasons best known to them. This is a colossal loss and wastage of national wealth for a poor country like ours. It is also a great misfortune for us all.

From time to time various relevant government organisa-