

Reviewing the Canals

"Canal digging programme lagging behind target," so said a Daily Star headline on Monday. What target? We are sure, barring possibly a very select and esoteric few, no one in the nation ever knew what was targeted to be achieved by this programme — in national terms. The above observation comes from a report understandably evaluating the performance so far of the programme — by the Planning Commission. It should be this body which must have been told about the target. And the nation would be terribly interested to know about that in brass terms — of irrigation and crop gains, solving waterlogging, helping communication, contributing to general fertility and regeneration of land and fighting desertification, etc. etc.

There could once be a line of thought in this land of dying rivers that networks of freshly cut canals joining the main arteries of water or big reservoirs to running rivers could prove helpful in a rather hopeless situation.

But the thought, if there was indeed one, was put into action before it was seriously thrashed by the best hydrological, hydrographical, ecological, agricultural and geographical expertise available in the nation.

At a time when the government's number one duty was to create jobs and put adult manpower to gainful employment — jobless people were now to dig canals for nothing better than a possible increase in the yields of the acres owned by the opulent ones in the village. It didn't click and food-for-work was called in to save the situation.

In the absence of a nationally devised integrated programme on the principle that even a cubic centimetre of water coursing through any kind of waterway — was in fact one single body of water involving world's three mightiest rivers and the wettest region of the globe, canals were to be dug purely on locally arrived-at priorities. And these priorities, more often than not, were fixed on considerations of satisfying the greed of the most powerful in the area.

Whatever good, howsoever small, could accrue locally was set at nought by the above. If the canals were dug deep enough and if the rivers or reservoirs feeding them were full of water round the year, canals could do a lot of good which is what they are dug for. There was no guaranteeing either of these, but canals continued to be cut. A telltale consequence was the fate of President Ziaur Rahman's dream canal at Ulashi Jadunathpur.

It was that late-lamented President Rahman who thought up this grand scheme. Supposedly more to electrify a drought nation into action and unity and also to make town-dwelling bureaucrats and politicians to go down to the villages and imbibe a sense of kinship with the rural realities and their hapless victims — than possibly in expectation of an effective answer to the dwindling volume of river-water.

Our Prime Minister's harking back to a programme that never yielded sterling results may have been prompted by equally political considerations with an additional helping of sentimental reasons. Now the Planning Commission has come up with an evaluation of the programme that will be reviewed by Begum Zia in a day or two. Inklings of that report tend to confirm long-held reservations about the programme some of which are enumerated above. We are happy that some responsible agency has spoken out on the inadequacies and problems of a dearly pet of a government programme. If the Prime Minister can rise above sentiments and the temptation of politicking with water and can broach the programme pragmatically, it can be saved from degenerating into a regular nuisance.

It would not be out of place to recall the wisdom of Wilcox who had said the ancient Bengalees were the best water managers in the world and they thought it criminal to tamper with coursing water and depended wholly, for irrigation, on rain water reservoirs and dyking of excess flood waters. The government of late has turned its attention on redigging derelict tanks and ponds. This is a positively good work and one hopes this would be extended to include excavation of thousands of new tanks and ponds. How wonderful would it really be if the whole material and political drive spent on the dubious canals were channeled to this one fail-safe way out of our water quandary.

Singapore Election

Yet another election, this one for choosing an executive president with expanded powers over fiscal matters, has come and gone. Now, it will be business as usual in the tiny but one of the most affluent republics in Asia, Singapore.

Or perhaps not quite. Ong Teng Cheong, who resigned as the deputy prime minister of the government to contest the polls as the ruling party's preferred candidate has, as expected, won the race, the only other contestant being Chua Kim Yeow, a banker, who was said to be up in the race to give certain legitimacy to the election. The saddest part of the exercise was that less than two weeks before the polls, two prominent opposition candidates were disqualified by the election committee on the ground that they both failed to meet "standards of integrity, experience and ability."

Now, many people, inside Singapore and outside, have been wondering what might have happened if any of the two candidates had been allowed to exercise his democratic right of staying on in the race.

This speculation arises from the fact that winner Ong has won 58.7 per cent of valid votes, with his relatively unknown rival Chua taking as much as 41.3 per cent. This marks another fall in the votes cast in the polls for the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), declining from 75.55 per cent in the 1980, progressively down to 59.31 in the 1991 election.

Goh Chok Tong, the pragmatic prime minister of the city state, regards the voting outcome of the last week's presidential election as one reflecting "the growing maturity of the electorate." Many hardliners within the ruling party, perhaps even Lee Kuan Yew, now a senior minister in the Goh cabinet, may not necessarily agree. They may look at the result with concern.

Singapore is anything but a one party state. However, with the total control exercised by PAP over the parliament — and now also over the office of the executive president — the republic is very much in a "one party situation." The country's phenomenal economic progress remains unmatched by contemporary political changes, evoking criticisms outside and discontent among the professional classes and the new generation. The city state must indeed move towards a genuine multi-party democracy that allows an increasing number of opposition candidates to sit in the parliament. How this can be done should be the main concern of the ruling party, preferably before the next parliamentary election due in 1995.

ONE of the reference books I find useful is *Varsha Parij 1392* brought out by Bangla Academy early in 1985. This almanac confirms my personal belief that there is nothing special about any month or any sign of the zodiac. Great men were born and they died without showing any marked partiality to any of the twelve months of the year. It must be a sheer coincidence that the death of three of our greatest men — and men closest to the heart of our people — happened in the month of August: Rabindranath's on the 8th, Shaikh Mujibur Rahman's on the 15th, and Nazrul Islam's on the 29th. That the same month saw the death of Dante and the birth of Goethe, not to mention many other deaths and births, all worthy of celebration, does not trouble our parochial mind. As a people we have our modest share of greatness and we are fully preoccupied with what is ours.

We paid our tributes to the poets more or less in the usual manner. We noticed a special poignancy this time about the observances on Bangabandhu's death. With every passing year, the enormity of the crime is striking our conscience with an increasing force. And this was evidenced this time all over Bangladesh, and particularly in Tongipara.

All this was routine. What was outside the August routine was a series of political happening, three to be precise. First, Awami League held a mammoth public meeting on the 20th August, in which a series of resolutions were adopted. The

A Month of Remembrance and Resolution

resolutions were a sort of compendium of all that the Party has been saying in recent days. If there is to be a mid-term election tomorrow — I do not think that is what AL would wish to happen at the moment — one can imagine that the Party's election manifesto will be written along these lines. The resolutions indicate what the Party would place before the voters as its priorities and also what it would identify as the particular failures of the party in power. How the voters will receive the message is a different matter. What we will notice is that, barring a few general statements, quite a few of the remaining ones are positive in their intent. Maybe the really important part of the outcome is the action programme for September 8 ("Save the farmer" save the country day), for September 18 (nation-wide rallies and processions), and finally for October 10 (general strike throughout the country).

Evidently, the main opposition party has resolved to launch a sustained political campaign, in an attempt both to sharpen its claws as an opposition, and to assert its potency and vitality in view of the recent defections. Since BNP is out to consolidate its gains, keeping in view the next general election, what else could Awami League do but to demonstrate that it is mindful of its responsibilities as the main opposition. But this party will do in its own way, stopping short of forming a shadow cabinet, which it has

been urged to do by many sympathisers of the party.

Between this public meeting, a kind of a show of strength, and quite an effective show at that, and the just-concluded fourth Council meeting of BNP (September 1 and 2) happened the grand convention with Dr Kamal Hossain as its convenor (August 27-29).

It is not easy to pronounce on the long term impact of this much-publicised and may I say much awaited event. The gathering was impressive, the inaugural session would have

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

done credit to any established political party, and the planning of the session showed both freshness of ideas and competence in execution. In short, to any impartial observer, it was a good augury, considered purely from the view point of one who is a little bored with the general run of politics here. There is hope for a departure from the staleness, paucity of ideas and the institutionalisation of crude and self-defeating methods which both the major parties have come to represent, at least in the judgement of many unattached observers. For those who look upon the new party — Gana Forum is not a happy name — as a conglomerate of desperate elements not playing any meaningful role in recent politics, the venture is doomed to failure. Not every one will

anywhere.

I have come across many people who are disillusioned with the quality of leadership of both the major parties and who expect a higher note to come from this new direction.

Dr Yunus gave a remarkable speech — remarkable in its freshness, its audacity and its wit — and he did full justice to his assigned role as the principal speaker. I do not believe that Gana Forum is going to make him the party's ideological 'guru'. Still, I see his participation and his speech as something of symbolic import. It will not do to dismiss his address as far too romantic, far too utopian. There is room for utopian dreams if only because the reality is both sordid and oppressive.

The third event, BNP's fourth

Council meeting, if not happening in August, happened immediately after. It could be seen as happening in the extended August of 1993.

Undoubtedly the event has been something of great significance for the ruling party. It provided a grand opportunity for a meeting of minds. It seems that the party workers came with a general grievance against the party leadership, mainly for their aloofness, and their tendency to consult the local bureaucracy rather than the local party workers. Does it indicate that the party machinery at the local level is not sufficiently knowledgeable or dependable for the central leadership to profit from? Anyway, the grievances were ventilated, and this may have some influence on the future conduct of the central leaders when they next visit their constituencies.

The Council meeting, as far as I can see, did not become a forum from which the leaders could say things that would catch the attention of the South Asian audience, if not of the world beyond. Discussion tended to be confined mainly to organisational matters. About the only thing of national and international interest was the change in the Party's constitution, indicating its final adoption of the Parliamentary model of government. This adoption has surely put an end to a nagging doubt about the Party's stand on this important issue.

To an extent, perhaps, the Party's constitution has been

made more democratically oriented than it was. If a Council meeting is expected to produce a new leadership structure, that has not happened. Apparently, an open contest for key positions of a party is something which neither Awami League nor BNP is ready for yet. Why this should be so, I do not understand. If vital decisions are left for one person, just to avoid ill-feeling among aspirants for certain posts, then the picture one gets is of a fragile structure, unable to withstand the whiff of a wind.

Begum Khaleda Zia's speech presented a picture of achievements of her government, but the optimistic strain made too much of a claim on our credence. She might have shown, along with her satisfaction with what has been achieved, an awareness of what remained to be achieved. What was obscure before, in respect of a few vital policy matters — the Gholam Azam issue, the Indemnity clause of the Constitution among others — has remained obscure. This attitude may soon turn into a kind of obscurantism, a dangerous state for a political party.

One thing was made perfectly clear: BNP's aspiration to remain in power for the next quarter century. Let us hope that the aspiration does not become a determination. Let us hope that a justified confidence built on an assumption of the opponent's weakness does not lead to a kind of arrogance which can only hurt the democratic susceptibilities of a people.

A Perilous Peace Holds despite Peacemakers

by Baffour Ankomah

Hopes are rising that Liberia's bloody civil war, which according to the UN has killed as many as 150,000 people, may really be over. The country's three warring factions have signed a peace agreement, and hostilities seem to have ended. But maintaining the peace will largely depend on how much the international community helps the war-ravaged nation.



and encampment of the fighters of the warring groups.

But disarmament cannot start until UN monitors arrive, and additional troops from other African countries are in to beef up the strength of Nigerian-dominated ECOMOG, the West African force sent to Liberia in August 1990. ECOMOG was sent as a peacekeeper but instead became one of the main combatants fighting against the NPFL.

Funds for the whole operation, from disarmament to the elections, are due to come from the international community

but with the recent announcement that the UN is already broke, it will take some time to find money.

The OAU eminent person for Liberia, former president of Zimbabwe, Canaan Banana said in Geneva during the July peace talks that Western countries had pledged funds which would not be released, however, until a workable ceasefire had been achieved.

The most important factor in maintaining peace is, however, the sincerity and impartiality of the men charged with refereeing the peace accord. People like Trevor Gordon-Somers, the Jamaican UN special envoy for Liberia, Canaan Banana, Abbas Bundu, the Sierra Leonean, ECOWAS Secretary General, and James Jonah, the Sierra Leonean UN Under-Secretary for political affairs hold Liberia's fate in their hands — periously.

Compared to the men in UN and ECOWAS garb, the leaders of the warring factions are minor players.

Although Taylor has been blamed as the stumbling block to peacemaking, critics say, the insincerity and mistakes of UN and ECOWAS officials are largely responsible for Liberia's problems.

For example, days after the new accord was signed in Cotonou, a time when confidence building measures were most needed, Gordon-Somers instructed Ivory Coast to close

its border with Liberia to prevent international aid agencies from reaching the hundreds of thousands of Liberians starving in areas under NPFL control.

This, according to Gordon-Somers, was done to prevent Taylor from getting fresh arms across the border disguised as relief vehicles.

Ad agencies denied the accusation vehemently but that did not stop ECOMOG from bombing or strafing aid convoys crossing the border on several occasions.

A survey conducted in July by the permission of ECOMOG by the Geneva-based International Committee of the Red Cross showed that 250,000 civilians were starving in Taylor's area.

Even though aid convoys were prepared to submit their convoys to UN and ECOMOG inspection, and clause in the new peace accord demanded that "humanitarian assistance should be delivered to all Liberians through the most di-

rect routes," Gordon-Somers closed the border and then went on holiday.

The border was only opened on 13 August after an enraged Lord Eric Avebury, chairmap of the British Parliamentary Human Rights Committee, wrote to Jonah asking him to "suspend Gordon-Somers from his duties pending an inquiry into why he issued an instruction that would lead to the deaths of thousands of children."

What Lord Avebury didn't know was that Gordon-Somers had closed the border to spite Jonah. According to insiders, Gordon-Somers felt slighted when Jonah flew from New York to Cotonou to sign the accord on behalf of the UN, instead of Gordon-Somers who had done all the preparatory work and had chaired the peace talks in Geneva which culminated in the accord.

Gordon-Somers is believed to have ordered the closure of the border simply as a way of showing Jonah who was really in control.

Such actions of the referees of the accord and not the Liberians themselves, will eventually make or unmake peace in the country. — GEMINI NEWS

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OPINION

Wanted: A New Style of Politics

A Mawaz

There are several reasons, vital to the national interest, to welcome the new political party Gono Forum, under the leadership of an enlightened and highly educated personality commanding international respect.

The reasons might be the same which made Dr Kamal Hossain leave his old party. For our salvation, a new style of politics has to be introduced in Bangladesh, as the existing styles are not working since the country gained independence two decades ago.

After two years of the introduction of the western type of democracy, the people are disappointed at the stagnation at the national level. Before blaming the people, the leaders of the people have to shoulder the responsibility, and therefore the verdict is clear: The combined leadership has failed to steer the country on to the promised road to prosperity. We are beating about the bush, and cannot break out of the jungle of the various isms. Passionate belief in one's (dubious) doctrines, and intolerance, have created vicious circles, and we are caught within the centripetal forces.

There was a little disappointment for an omission which I would like to regard as inadvertent. While you named the three brilliant nephews of the Sardar, you forgot the eldest of the four brothers, Nasir (A N Ahmad), who was not merely the guide and guardian of the other three talented brothers, but was, in a larger sense, the true spiritual child of the renowned Sardar — with his keen business sense, power of leadership and social service.

A prime mover in many commercial and industrial ventures including the family's show business, Nasir was a born leader. Apart from being the president of the Dhaka Chamber for two terms, he was the Kingmaker for many years in major business organisation.

His last gesture of charity was the donation of his eyes — one of the first person to do so in Bangladesh.

May his soul rest in peace.

*B Ahmad
Gulshan, Dhaka.*

political parties to spell out the policies. Politics is a specialised and complex discipline, needing years of experience and maturity, based on a sound foundation of the science, and applied conscientiously by cultivated minds who have a clear vision of goal ahead. Statesmanship has priority over politics.

It is unfortunate that amateurs and adventurists have retarded the development of the nation for half a century. Shall we be able to get out of the vicious circle? There is an unpleasant yardstick sounding a note of warning: the people get the Government they deserve. Even then, there is no consolation. We threw out an autocratic regime, and once again we are bogged down with trivialities and petty-mindedness in an atmosphere of so-called democracy. The leaders police us; who will police the leaders?

In a have-not society, it is difficult to resist temptation and the misuse of power. Nepotism becomes a corollary; followed by corruption. Under these circumstances, self-reliance in leadership becomes dependent on external points of reference, leading to coerties and power groups, resulting in the misuse of group pressure, which may not always be in public interest.

Another characteristic of this environment is the glamour for politics and anything political. That might be the reason for the penetration of politics in so many areas of our daily lives where it should not be present. To contain influence of politics in the non-political areas these have to be depolitized. It is not an easy task with a low standard of living. So we have many problems revolving in vicious circles. It is like a space craft escaping from earth's gravitational field: a minimum velocity is required for take-off.

The new Gono Front will be watched carefully and with keen interest.