

Special News Focus

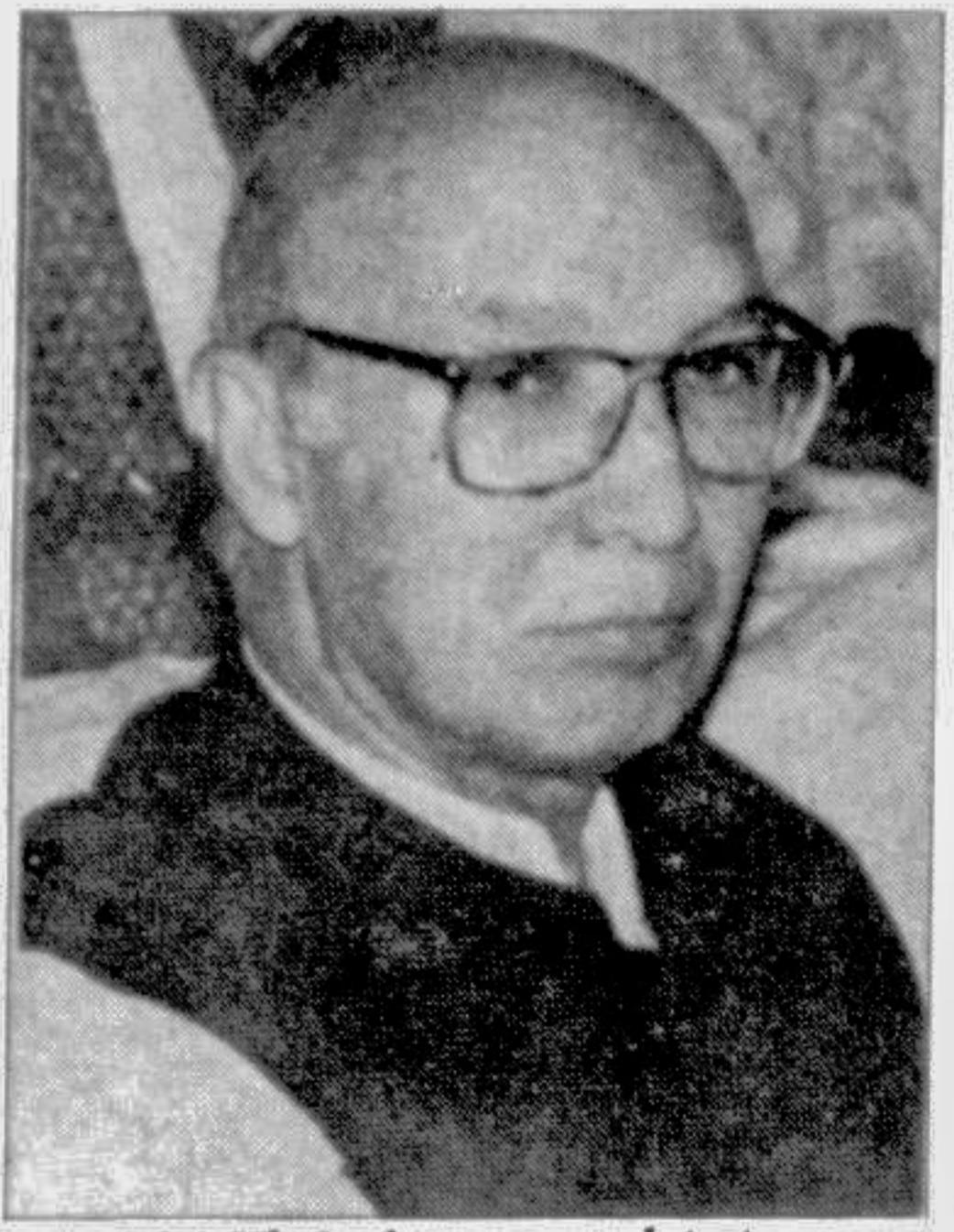
Election in Pakistan

COMPARED to the usual run of the mill politicians of the subcontinent, Sartaj Aziz, the recently elected secretary general of the Nawaz Sharif led Pakistan Muslim League (PML), is a breed apart. A long time government official, who acquired considerable fame as an economist, then became internationally known as the head of IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development). He became a full-time politician in 1984 and has been with the Muslim League, through its various incarnations. It was possibly an indication of the warm relations between Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Nawaz Sharif, that the latter sent no less a person than the secretary general of the party, to the BNP council session, right in the midst of the election, scheduled for October 6 next.

The most important thing about the coming election, according to Aziz, is the fact that the democratic process has survived the recent crisis and that people will be able to give a fresh mandate to the leaders. With the dismissal of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif by President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, and the former's subsequent reinstatement by the Supreme Court, brought to a head the power struggle between the Prime Minister and the President. This has been brewing ever since the President appointed the chief of the army staff over the recommendation of the PM. According to Aziz, Nawaz Sharif sacrificed two and half years of his remaining term of office, and agreed to new polls, only to clear the air, and resolve the political crisis.

This line of action was adopted to get a renewed mandate for his leadership. New polls was also the only way to make President Ghulam Ishaq agree to resign, which was a pre-condition for the smooth functioning of any future Sharif government, Aziz explains. Thus the two documents — that of fresh elections and President's resignation were handed in simultaneously.

The Muslim League Secretary-General was full of praise for the army, who he said, instead of taking advantage of the situation and grabbing power — as they have done many times in the past — played the role of an honest broker. But didn't that role playing indirectly make the army the "king maker"? No, said Aziz. Pakistan army has certain influence which one cannot ignore. But in this instance, it was used to



SARTAJ AZIZ: Seeking a mandate to complete unfinished work.

Democracy now stronger than ever in Pakistan

— Aziz

strengthen the democratic process.

About the coming elections, the Muslim League leader felt quite optimistic. He said that his party's approach was to ask for continuity, rather than new mandate. Whole set of dramatic changes and reforms were started by the Sharif government. These reforms had been interrupted by the President's action. "Now we want a renewed chance to finish the unfinished work. If those policies were good for Pakistan, as was evident by the dramatic improvements in the economy, then we should be re-elected to complete those changes."

Aziz said that, it is for the first time in 23 years — meaning after the election of 1970, followed by the birth of Bangladesh — that the Pakistan Muslim League was contesting the elections under its own party banner. "This time we are not going for any alliance, but for adjustment of seats." What is the difference? "For example ANP (Awami National Party) led by Walt Khan in NWFP (North West Frontier Province) is our partner in this election. It will contest in 10 seats, under its own party banner, where we will not put up any candidate. In this manner we have made adjustment in 30-35 seats. For

the rest, we will contest on our own. In the alliance system, when there is differences of opinion on some issues — say like the Gulf War — some partners quit, and the alliance becomes smaller. As it happened with us in the IJI (Islamic Jamhuriya Ittehad) alliance. Now we will know our strength. If others join, then we become bigger."

The PML is going to the polls on the platform of making Islam the focal point of national unity, with the Islamic principles of social justice receiving high priority in the future policies of the government.

Aziz explains that according to Islamic Principles, one's "Janaza" is not proper, if he or she leaves behind debt. This principle could be used to collect bank debts, taxes etc. The Islamic Principle of helping the poor as an obligation is superior to the western principle of "charity". The idea is to use the Islamic principles to build a progressive and just society in Pakistan.

There is also the objective of strengthening democracy. For this, all provisions in the present Constitution that undermine the supremacy of the parliament will be amended, including abolishing floor crossing. Will there be attempt to

adjustment with utmost curiosity.

cut the power of the President? "Any provision that challenges the supremacy of the parliament, will be changed," Aziz repeats. What about the power of the President? "We will spell out our policy later. That is our negotiating point. We do not want to show our hand at this stage," the PML leader replied.

As for the chances of winning, Aziz seems to have a lot of faith in Nawaz Sharif's popularity. He said he is more popular now than he has been ever before. Ghulam Ishaq's action, and the subsequent ruling by the Supreme Court, and the decision by Sharif to sacrifice the remainder of his term so that the political crisis is resolved; all this has added prestige to Sharif. His leadership qualities have now been tested through the crisis. His popularity will be a big factor in the election.

The fact of the matter is that Nawaz Sharif was a product of the former President's manipulation. It was Ghulam Ishaq Khan who handicapped Sharif to replace Bhutto in 1990. However it is also true that Nawaz Sharif gradually became his own person as he began to resent the President's overbearing role. It is the Supreme Court judgement that has catapulted Sharif to the height of his popularity. Whether this sudden rise in public appeal will carry him through the elections, is something that everybody is watching with utmost curiosity.

THE name Ispahani is well known in the subcontinent. This family's role in the Pakistan movement, and in the subsequent economic development of erstwhile Pakistan is also well known. With the birth of Bangladesh, a part of the family has remained here and made significant contribution in our development. The other part, has played its part in the growth of Pakistan. Now, a prominent member of this renowned family, has entered the complex world of politics in Pakistan. Zia Ispahani is a member of Benazir Bhutto's PPP. Party and belongs to a core group that deals with media and policy formulation of the party. He recently represented his party at the BNP Council Session.

Zia is a suave, highly sophisticated person and has all the hall marks of a leading entrepreneur. So what was he doing in politics? "Trying to serve my people," he said. He got into this turbulent world, as a result of his admiration for Air Marshal Asgar Khan. "He was full of good ideas, and I became attracted because of my own idealism." But as it usually happens, good people are unable to turn their good ideas into effective political programmes. That is what happened to Air Marshal Asgar Khan. "So I joined the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) in 1989 which is the only mass based progressive party in Pakistan."

Zia was emphatic in his view that Nawaz Sharif, in connivance with former President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, toppled Benazir Bhutto's government in 1990. He did not utter the words, but implied, that Sharif's government was illegitimate, and what he got, was coming to him. But wasn't Benazir's role unethical? After all, she was supporting a Presidential action which was later found to be illegal by the Supreme Court. Zia's reply was clear. Benazir supported the move because that was the only way of ensuring new elections in Pakistan. The PPP joined the interim government because it wanted fresh elections. That was the only reason. To us in Bangladesh, it appeared that Benazir was a bit too eager to get into the government. But as Zia explained, "If Nawaz Sharif stayed in power, he would not have permitted a free and fair election." So is it the position that end justifies means — however unethical the means may be?

According to Zia, Benazir's action was fully justified given Nawaz Sharif's record of broken pledges and unethical behaviour. Sharif was himself the product of illegal removal from power of Benazir. But does one wrong action justify another? NO, it does not, Zia said. But continued that Benazir's was not a wrong or unethical action.

Regarding PPP chances in the election, Zia felt that Nawaz Sharif's record in office would do him in. The country was on the verge of bankruptcy. When Sharif was dismissed, as was stated by the caretaker Prime Minister. So who bankrupted the country? PPP was out of power since 1990. The finger is clearly pointed at the direction of Sharif. Then there is the question of widespread corruption. According to Zia, the government of Sharif was thoroughly corrupt, and the people of Pakistan have got totally tired of corruption.

Corruption would be one of the main reasons why the people would reject Sharif in the coming election, Zia asserted.

What about corruption of the Bhutto family, especially all



ZIA ISPANAH: Reestablishing claim to mass popularity.

Corruption will be a critical issue in this election

— Ispahani

that was said of Benazir's husband Asif Zardari, and her father-in-law? Zia was prompt in replying that all the cases that were lodged against him were dismissed by the court, vindicating Benazir's position that they were all framed.

As for the other political parties backing them, the PPP has one religious party (Shia) and the faction of Muslim League that broke away from Nawaz Sharif during the last crisis, called the Chadda Muslim League. Except for these two small parties, PPP was virtually on its own.

Like Sartaj Aziz, Zia Ispahani also seemed to put a lot of faith on the personal popularity of his party boss. "There is no question that Benazir is the most popular politician in the country today. She is a great crowd puller, and can defeat Nawaz Sharif in a face to face debate anytime."

There is no question that Ghulam Ishaq Khan manipulated Benazir's fall, and orchestrated the rise of Nawaz Sharif. But ironically, it is the same Ishaq Khan that caused Sharif's government to fall. Will people remember Benazir's fate in Ishaq Khan's hands, or that of Sharif, which happened much later. Which way will the sympathy vote go? How much damage was caused by Bhutto's opportunistic behaviour during the crisis.

But the claim Zia makes about PPP being a far more organised party, has a lot of merit. It will be PPP's performance in the crucial province of Punjab — Nawaz Sharif's home ground — that will make the crucial difference. In 1988 election when Benazir came power, she won a majority in Punjab for the National Assembly, seats, but lost out to Sharif in the provincial assembly election.

So how is PPP's prospect in Punjab? Zia gave the usual 'thumbs-up' reply, without spelling out the reasons. PPP's support, from the break away ML faction, will count for a lot. But Chadda-Muslim League, as that faction is called, could not make too much dent on the PML, and its influence is not likely to be significant.

The election will finally prove whether the crowd Benazir pulls to her meeting, she will be able to bring to vote for her.

Feature

Environment

Bagmati: Episode of a Dying River

by Inam Ahmed, back from Nepal

THE flood water had receded. But the villagers of Sharla, some fifty kilometers from Kathmandu city, were baffled to find their agricultural land beside the Bagmati river littered with plastic bags, bottles, animal carcasses and what not. They did not know where all these wastes and litters came from, nor did they know how these were originated.

Journalists coming from the flood affected Sharla area reported that the farmers were busy weeding out the wastes that originated in the capital city of Kathmandu. Then washed down by the flood water of Bagmati river into the village.

The city dwellers have been contaminating the Bagmati river over the years on such a scale that it is no more a river now, just a stream of pollution that contains plastic, chemicals, solid wastes, liquid wastes, dyes and everything," Huta Ram Baidya, the vice-president of Save Bagmati Campaign, an organisation to highlight the plight of the dying river said.

The effect had been on agriculture, health and the religious culture of the valley.

Walking down the river at Thabathali, the southern tip of the capital city, the first thing that one becomes aware of is the strong foul odour coming out of the blackish water.

The usual scenario panorama of a river bank is absent here. Instead, heaps of rotting animals' intestines and throw-aways encounter the eyes. Garbage of all kinds is strewn around and dirty black hogs roam the filth.

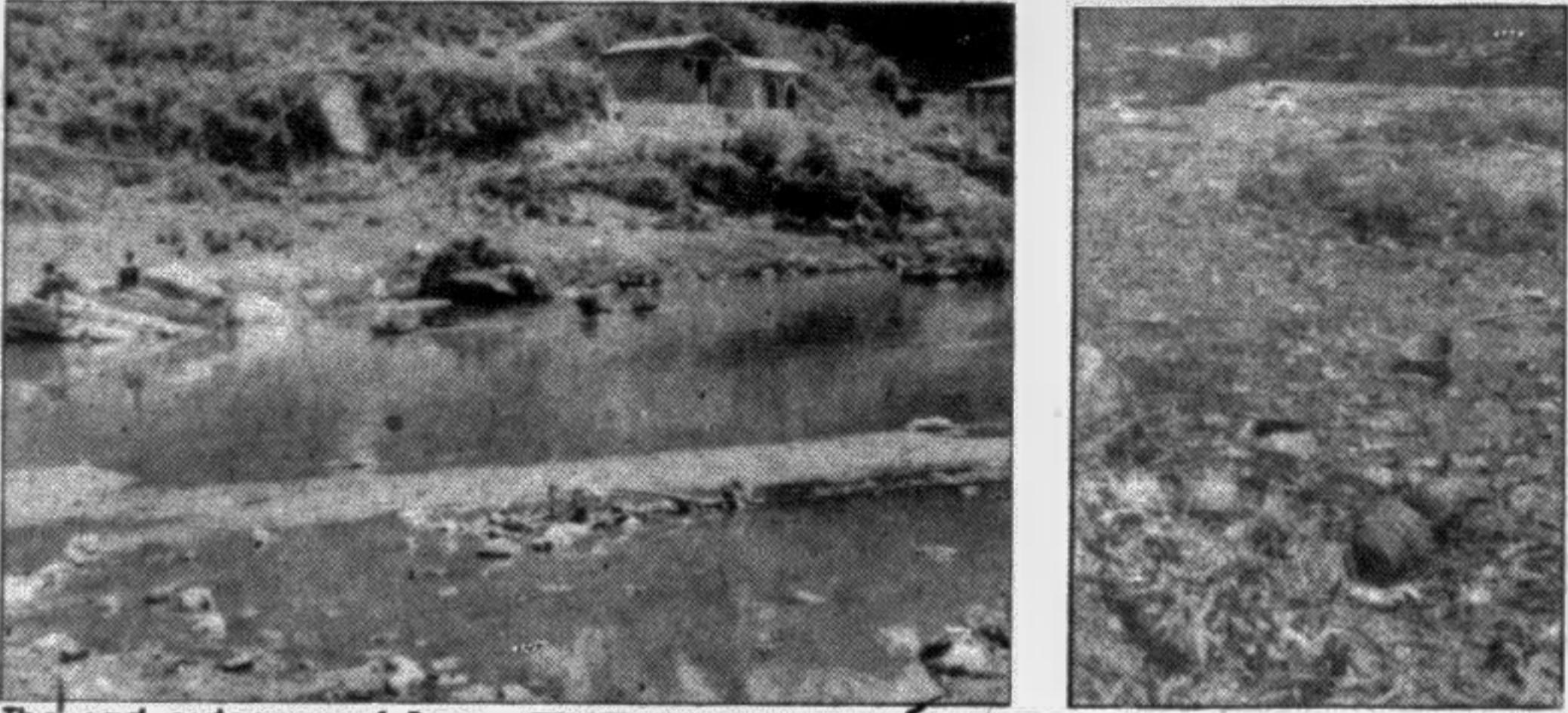
The Bagmati, the holiest river of Nepal which is believed to have originated from the speech of Lord Shiva, now lies dying because of the pollution of Kathmandu city.

"The condition of the Bagmati shows the state of pollution in Kathmandu, because it is the city that causes all the pollution in the river, the villagers downstream the river are the innocent victims," says Ajay Dixit, a water resource engineer and editor of Water Nepal.

The sewer lines from the city pour untreated solid and liquid wastes into the Bagmati. With this, add the dyes and other effluents from the industries of the city.

In the recent years, the population of Kathmandu has rapidly increased to an estimated six lakhs or above in 1991. It is now thought to be a

Ghats and temples built along the river crumbled down because of sand mining. With heaps of wastes around, the temples have been derelict and homeless people have taken over these religious places. The blissful grace of the river has gone and only dirt and filth has taken over. Instead of devotees, hogs and dogs roam the stinking rubbish.



The sad outcome of Bagmati, now transformed into a stream of pollutants.

full million. But facilities have not been built to treat the waste of this expanding city. "The lone waste treatment plant at Chovar, about ten kilometers from the city is now inoperative as lines coming into the plant have become choked", Dixit said, "the people linked their sewer lines illegally to storm drains and thus allowing the wastes into the holy Bagmati".

According to a report on Bagmati Basin Water Management Strategy and Investment Programme drafted recently, the waste water volume generated in the Bagmati basin amounts to some 54 million litres per day, which has a total pollution load of five tonnes. But the city people are not the main victims of this pollution, victims are the people living at the river bank at Chovar, because it is here, at the turn of the Bagmati, the water is most polluted. "We used to drink water from the river and cook meals only about ten years ago," said Gauri Mathema, a middle aged villager of Chovar Goshesh, "but as the water became more and more dirty, it is no more possible to use the water during the dry season it upsets our stomach."

The villagers have also abandoned bathing in the Bagmati because it causes diarrhoea and scabies", as Madhab Kumar, another villager of Gokarna village said, "we do not know why."

The city dwellers have not stopped at polluting the river, they have gone to the extent of

digging the river bed for sand. "Each year, 6000 new houses are being built in Kathmandu city and people just go over to the river, dig up the sand for their construction works," Ajay Dixit said, "as the sand vanishes, the river bed becomes muddy. This has changed the ecosystem of the river. We are yet to ascertain to what extent the damage has been done."

Bagmati is a major source of irrigation for the villagers. They set up handpumps to lift the surface water from the river for their paddy fields. The villagers do not know whether the polluted water of the Bagmati had any effect on their crops. But many complained that productivity has gone down over the years. "Sometimes, the sheaves of the paddy dry up and turn red," Ravi Thapa, another villager of Gokarna village said, "we do not know why."

The city dwellers have not stopped at polluting the river, they have gone to the extent of

gone down, such simple methods no longer work, as has happened in case of the vegetable farmers in Thimi, a small village off Kathmandu. Farmers now have to use diesel pumps for irrigation, but all farmers cannot afford it. The pollution of the Bagmati has recently become a major concern for the city as well as the rural dwellers because of its religious value. The people take bath in the holy river to "wash away their sins and to have blessings of the gods."

As decomposed bodies of dogs, cows and other animals float in the water, devotees have to take bath in the dirty water.

Ghats and temples built along the river crumbled down because of sand mining. With heaps of wastes around, the temples have been derelict and homeless people have taken over these religious places. The blissful grace of the river has gone and only dirt and filth has taken over. Instead of devotees, hogs and dogs roam the stinking rubbish.

With the pollution of the Bagmati increasing day by day, people are becoming hurt sentimentally and the government is in a fix how to cope up with the pollution. Very recently, it has taken up a programme to clear the Bagmati water.

"But it needs a lot of money and the government does not have it", says Ajay Dixit, "moreover, there are no magic solutions. We can build a lot of treatment plants, but again, where is the money?"

The more crucial question to the problem is the management of the treatment plants. In the past, the government had failed to maintain the plant at Chovar.

"Law enforcement in the city is weak," says Dr Shree Gavinda Shah, president of Save Bagmati Campaign, "There is a lack in political commitment and the city's organisational set ups are rickety. These must be strengthened first, before any plants are set up. Otherwise, people would continue to pollute the river, and in the end villagers at Chovar, who do not knowingly pollute the water, would remain as the innocent victims."

Consequently, when another flood will occur, the villagers at Sharla are likely to see another out-rush of wastes and litters from places they do not know.

This feature was prepared by the writer under a Panos Institute fellowship in Nepal.

Baby Rhinos will Stay Home

aphrodisiac properties. The Asian rhino has only one horn and is slightly smaller and more docile than the African black rhino.

The last remaining Asian rhinos are found in the grassland fringes of jungles in South and South-east Asia.

"Yes, we have received a letter asking us to start necessary action on the application," confirms Dr Tirtha Man Maskey, director general of Nepal's Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation.

"I agree that giving rhinos as gifts must stop and we will

an Asian Development Bank (ADB)-funded irrigation project on the east Rapti river is also creating problems. Conservationists say plans to replace traditional irrigation systems with concrete structures will disturb the ground water level that will eventually affect the grasslands in which the rhinos thrive."

Government officials say they will conduct a country-wide rhino census in the autumn.

In the first half of this century before migrants moved in



Worried by depleted herds, Nepal will stop giving baby rhinos away as gifts to overseas zoos. Binod Bhattarai reports for Inter Press Service.

soon be working out a policy to do so".

A survey in Nepal's best-known national park, the Royal Chitwan, some 100 kms south of Kathmandu, shows it has lost 102 rhinos in last 12 years.

While more than half the rhinos died natural deaths, 22 per cent were killed by poachers and 23 per cent were either sold or presented to visiting heads of state.

According to his rough calculations, Nepal has lost more rhinos to zoos abroad than to poachers between 1980 and 1992.

This prompted a concerned zoologist to write to Nepal's Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala to stop giving away rhinos as gifts.

Koirala's office acted quickly and instructed the Forest Ministry to take action to protect the pachyderm that roams the foothills of the Himalaya.

The Asian rhino, like its African cousin, has been hunted for its horn which is believed to have

cleared the forests, the thick tropical jungles along Nepal's southern border were home to huge herds of rhinos. But poachers and hunters brought the population of rhinos in Chitwan down to a mere 45 in the 1960s.

The rhino was saved from extinction by the government's decision in the early seventies to set up the Royal Chitwan National Park, which was strictly patrolled by the Nepali army.

Safe from poachers, the number of rhinos