

Arafat's Gamble

The decision by the PLO and Israel to recognise each other, marks both an historic end and a momentous beginning. It marks the probable end of violence, killing and death, that have been going on ever since the United Nations voted to partition Palestine into Israel and Arab states in November 1947. Six months later, in May, 1948, Israel proclaimed its independence, which started the first Arab-Israeli war that lasted for seven months. Subsequently, there was the six-day war in 1967, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, and the invasion of Lebanon by Israel in 1982. In addition to these wars, there has been constant violence between the Jewish state and the Palestinians.

However, the end of this incessant violence will be durable if the signing of the accord marks the genuine and sincere beginning of comprehensive negotiations to granting a viable and secure homeland for the Palestinians. There is no reason to be euphoric about the accord which is being signed. It gives too little to the Palestinians to satisfy anybody. The autonomy over the area in Gaza and Jericho can never, never be the final settlement. However, on the contrary, the agreement is not something that should be written-off as a 'defeat' or 'capitulation' by the ageing PLO chief, Yasser Arafat.

What we must understand is that, it is the outcome of the reality of the day. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Socialist bloc, the PLO lost a very powerful and dependable group of allies, without whose support the resistance against the armed aggression of Israel would have been practically impossible. The disintegration of the Soviet Union, especially, was a devastating blow for the Palestinian cause. This was followed by the eroding economic might of the Arab countries due, both to the decreasing oil revenue and greater domestic needs. The eight-year Iran-Iraq war and the Kuwaiti invasion by Iraq further whittled away Arab resources, a large portion of which could have gone to the Palestinians. The final writing on the wall for the PLO was the emergence of the United States as the only superpower in the world. The hold of the Jewish lobby on the US policy towards the Middle-East, as evidenced over the last four decades, left no doubt in anybody's mind as to which way the US would tilt now that it was, literally, the 'sole arbiter' of the events there.

So, what the veteran Palestinian leader did was to bow to the reality of the day, and open up doors for peace negotiations which may lead to the Palestinian people getting a homeland for themselves. The most important feature of the deal that has been worked out is that of Israel recognising the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinians and negotiating a peace settlement with them. It was back in 1988 that Arafat accepted Israel's right to exist. So in terms of recognition, PLO gains. But this gain comes at too big a price in terms of lost land — at least for the moment. What this deal brings is peace, but not justice. So the durability of this peace will depend on how quickly the two sides — foes for decades — can move forward to bring justice to the Palestinians.

Signing of the mutual recognition agreement is only the beginning of a historic journey, a journey that is laden with many obstacles, the biggest one of which is mutual hatred. The roof of the hatred goes back several centuries. But the history of the last 45 years has made it extremely bitter and bloody. Now the process has to be reversed. It is as if the 'clock of history' has to be turned back, so that it can only move forward in the direction of peace and justice.

There are many enemies of this process on both the sides. The rightist Jews would want no concession to be made to the PLO. The militant Palestinians consider this accord to be a surrender. Yasser Arafat has, no doubt, taken the biggest risk of his life, by signing this agreement. Having tried the way of force since 1964, when the PLO was formed, he has now gambled his future in the path of negotiations, to see whether this provides a better future for his beleaguered people.

DCC Goes Private—Partially

Mayor of the Dhaka City Corporation, Mirza Abbas has revealed that a plan for delegating some of the corporation's responsibilities to the private sector is under consideration. This shows that the Mayor is quite alive to the fact that not all is well with the services in the sprawling city he administers. His concern for improving conditions in some of those areas — where service is next to nothing — he has in mind should be shared by every well-meaning citizen. That he does not want to jump for a wholesale privatisation drive — he envisions the shift in phases — in his corporation looks pragmatic enough.

Yet in a world where denationalisation and market economy have become the catchwords, there is no reason to jump on the bandwagon without preparing a comprehensive plan for the same. Most of the time such steps — fashionable as they are — are taken without considering the local conditions and formulating appropriate guidelines and legal provisions so necessary for restraining the private bodies from taking undue advantages. Under no circumstances can they be allowed to degenerate into profit-mongering ventures from which only a few get the opportunity to enjoy the cream or worse, just leave those in ruins.

The mayor certainly will not be ready to savour such an appalling prospect for any of the city services, rather will feel elated to see that in private hands those will continue to prosper. As the first mayor to think of privatisation for city services, Mirza Abbas therefore has the added responsibility to see that his plan does not start with a bang and end in a whimper. The plan he has hit upon will depend largely on the competition he will be able to infiltrate in services concerned. One problem he is like to face is the lack of expertise in the private sector for handling the responsibilities in our city situation. The job becomes considerably easier if the citizens are also responsible in using the various facilities. This is almost an impossible proposition. Therefore, any private body's task will be harder with the continuation of the irresponsible behaviour of the consumers — be it in the garbage disposal, use of gas, electricity, water, public toilet or coin-box telephone.

So we come to a point where rules and guidelines are needed — more importantly, enforced — both for the enterprises as well as their consumers to make them competitive enough, a key to successful implementation of the privatisation programme.

Cheap Labour Potential: Response to the Challenge

I rented out my unused garage to a tailor. Within a short period of three months, he organized himself with five working hands and a steady supply of orders from customers within the locality. He eventually planned to secure some additional accommodation by inducing me to construct another floor on top of the garage and start operating under subcontract to the regular garment manufacturers.

Unfortunately, nothing happened. He could not last for more than two years — he had to vacate the place since municipal authorities in their infinite wisdom gave me a notice that no such business can be carried out in a residential locality. I was unhappy. Karam Ali Master Tailor had to leave. This was about six months back; now I often find him in the neighbourhood providing home delivery, working alone from his small living place at Mirpur with the help of only one assistant. True, my residential locality has been left pure, untouched by small time working places like the tailoring shop in my unused garage. Little did the authorities realize that in the process of securing the purity of residentiality they nipped an enterprise in the bud. It is impossible for Karam Ali to find another place where orders could be obtained from his target group of clients and delivery ensured on time. He has tried for six months and failed. "I am now downgraded to a tailor, no longer the tailor master," he told me with a heavy heart.

Imagine, on the other hand, a government scheme to settle 100,000 such tailoring enterprises in suitably located shophouses where they could realize their dreams of cutting and making garments for exports under subcontract to large producers as well as individual buyers. In fact, the number of such enterprises could be a

million, each employing 20 to 30 workers, mostly drawn from the same extended family.

The government initiative would then be a true response to the challenge posed by the potential of cheap labour. It is not necessary that garments must be manufactured by only large scale enterprises employing several hundred workers. It could be family based enterprises working under contract with the big buyers and large manufacturers. Yet we have no idea of rendering help to Karim Ali Master Tailor who had to close down his shop and with it, shatter his dream.

Similar is the case of Mofez Ali who had a roadside shack where using the pavement as the workplace, he set up his enterprise to manufacture iron grills for doors and windows — an essential item for any house under construction. He was an excellent craftsman; gave him any complicated design and he would come up with its exact replica on iron. I know it since I was his customer once. However, he could not survive as a roadside vendor. The underhand dealings that he had to go through with police, electricity linemen and municipal bill clerk proved too much and one fine morning he just melted away — vanished into thin air.

Lack of Suitable

Workplace

The problems of Mofez Ali and Karam Ali are very similar. They cannot find a suitable workplace conveniently located, from their business point of view, where they can benefit from utility services as well. RAJUK is keen to develop residential areas and business districts but suitable areas for small or micro enterprise development are lacking everywhere. Here the basic characteristics of the enterprise that I am talking about must be borne in mind: there are no distinctions be-

tween the entrepreneur, manager or the master craftsman engaged in the work of skill which adds value to the products under manufacture. With extremely low overhead, some-time free family labour, such enterprises are highly competitive. Yet recognized workplaces for the tailors or metal welders are few and far between in the urban areas of our country, Dhaka in particular.

The major problem, however, relates to the financing of such enterprises. They have hardly any collateral. In fact it is difficult if they have any bank credit. In several instances

standards, foundries and metal workshops are capable of doing wonders in the manufacture of machinery components and spare-parts. However, attention of the present government seems to have diminished. We don't hear of the Dolai Khal any more. Since lotus bloom in the mud and slush, it is possible that the small/micro enterprises might flourish in spite of the utter lack of attention given thus far to their development. The Dolai Khal continues as before, languishing as a poverty-ridden slum while the sleek operators have vanished with the funds borrowed exclu-

sively for the purpose of setting up new industrial units.

New Approach Needed

Clearly, a new approach to industrial development is called for. The traditional approach of drawing in the middle class into the mainstream of manufacturing growth has failed simply because there are not so many families who have got the desired asset base for the purpose and those who can provide for the collateral are either not interested or have already gone ahead with such investments. Unfortunately, the type of private sector we intend to support does not exist in the scale required for rapid manufacturing growth. Also it has got something to do with our value structure and cultural context. Bengalis were never known for their business acumen. Entrepreneurship is something which we always lacked. Even today, if you ask the handful of successful businessmen if their sons and daughters should fol-

Artisan Groups

For example, organize weavers groups for supervised credit, following the patterns and methodologies established by the Grameen Bank for landless peasant families. Such organizational efforts shall, among others, consist of technical training, skill development etc. in order to substantially upgrade their weaving capacities by introducing modern machinery and equipment. Once this is done, the weaving group is ready to operate a modern weaving enterprise set up entirely on borrowed funds but on easy, affordable terms so that repayment over the long term (five years) at tolerable rates of interest is feasible although strong supervision will always be needed so that the repayment standards of Grameen Bank could be achieved.

The same principles should hold good for the potters community who at present due to the onslaught of aluminum pots and pans are facing a dwindling market. The traditional unglazed pottery industry cannot survive and there is no sense in pining over it.

Instead, potters should be organized like the weavers into groups, given training in the manufacture of glazed pottery as well as ceramic products. Then long term loans should initiate a whole new industry — family based as happened in Italy — and the new ceramic and tile industry of the country can earn a billion dollars in exports and employ the entire potters community who are at present close to being destitute.

The scenarios of development may run in parallel for each category of family based micro/small manufacturing enterprises based on skills already available within the country although considerable upgrading will be necessary. The next efforts should be import of new skills and building up small enterprise-based indigenous manufacturing of numerous goods and services primarily geared to export markets. Examples in this respect are manufacture of hand-woven carpets, gems and jewelry, dolls, artificial flowers and thousands of such products where processes are labour intensive and there are markets abroad for the competitive manufacturers.

The cheap labour potential and challenges to the response basically follows the Grameen Bank model but the training component will be a new addition, loans per unit should be of a larger scale and very intensive supervision is a must. There will always be certain uniqueness to the course of development of any nation. Ours would be a course of micro-enterprise development by a class of promoters from the ranks of skilled workers and artisans and not the so-called mountaineers who only know to make hay while the sun shines.

The cheap labour potential is there. The appropriate response is the rightful challenge that faces the nation today.

Nigeria: It's a Tough Test for the Commonwealth

by Derek Ingram

After annulling the general election and taking Nigeria through a period of confusion and repression, military ruler Ibrahim Babangida has stood down and handed over to a civilian leader. The man thought to have won the general election, Chief Mashood Abiola, has been ignored. Many believe Babangida and the army will still be the real rulers of Nigeria. For the Commonwealth, reports Gemini News Service, this is a big test.



CHIEF ANYAOKU

When a country's internal affairs were regarded as sacred and intervention of any kind from outside was scorned. Today the international climate is different. Intervention, if not yet accepted as the norm, is at least beginning to be lived with.

At its Harare summit two years ago the Commonwealth for the first time laid down guidelines for members' behaviour and decided to help its



ERNEST SHONEKAN

members phase out one-party government and military rule. It agreed that certain rules should be applied before other countries were allowed to join the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth Secretary-General, Chief Emeke Anyaoku, is personally deeply committed to bringing fully democratic government to countries throughout the Commonwealth. He himself was foreign minister in the last civilian government in Nigeria and was a victim of the coup that has resulted in a decade of military rule there.

For him as a Nigerian and for the Commonwealth, annulment of the election held on June 12, which is widely regarded as having resulted in the victory of Chief Mashood Abiola, is particularly galling, since Nigeria is the largest and most important country in sub-Saharan Africa and one of the Commonwealth's most influential members.

Time was when the Commonwealth lived with such events and made no comment. Public opinion has shown that such behaviour by the United Nations and bodies like the Organisation of African Unity

(OAU) brings international organisations into disrepute — somewhat unfairly since their voice is the voice of the membership.

The UN is the butt of all criticism, yet it is not the organisation itself, or its ideals, which is at fault, but the member countries which make it up. They are responsible and the Secretary-General and his staff are their servants. It is the same with the Commonwealth and all other international bodies.

A Secretary-General has to articulate what he believes to be the consensus view among his member countries. With skill, he can be one jump ahead of them. In the Commonwealth the first two Secretaries-General, Arnold Smith, of Canada, and Shridath Ramphal, of Guyana, had a good record of outspokenness, but the times did not allow them to criticise much the behaviour of individual member countries.

Since Anyaoku took over as Commonwealth Secretary-General in 1990 and acquired a mandate in 1991 to push ahead in support of greater democracy and better human rights, he has been able to speak out on

these issues and he has done so. When a military coup took place in Sierra Leone early last year he was quick to condemn the soldiers and to call it a serious setback to the Commonwealth march to democracy. He firmly believes that there can be no compromise on matters of proper democracy and that the Commonwealth must keep on course. The Commonwealth is playing an active role in helping South Africa towards real democracy and Commonwealth countries must be an example.

So when General Ibrahim Babangida annulled the Nigerian elections in June Anyaoku appealed to the country's leaders to "pull the nation back from the brink to which it is being driven by these events."

And when the General handed over to an unelected government on August 26 headed by businessman Chief Ernest Shonekan he called events there "incomprehensible" and urged the new government to "weigh very carefully — for the sake of present and future generations of Nigerians — the full implications of permanently setting aside and election that was not only judged by international observers to be free and fair, but also showed that Nigerians could truly vote across the traditional divides of tribe and religion." For the Commonwealth principles set down by the leaders in their Harare Declaration Nigeria is becoming a test which will be increasingly watched as the Cyprus summit draws near.

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.

Ceiling fan industry

Sir, We are indeed gravely concerned to learn that our ceiling fan industry, which has grown and developed over the recent years under the protection of the government by way of total ban on import, is now under impending threat of closure. Should import be allowed in any form under the free market economy?

Since banning import of ceiling fan in 1984-1985, our own fan industry has developed significantly. Presently, there are as many as well over seventy-five ceiling fan factories in the country, catering to the domestic needs in full and with satisfaction. Consequently, many allied industries for some raw materials, like super enamel wire, etc. have developed side by side. Competition has improved the quality of our ceiling fan, the prices have come down without any compromise with the standard and after-sales services have also improved, — much to the advantages of customers. With continued support of our government, our fan manufacturers would be able to embark upon export in the foreseeable future, before long.

BTV-bashing

Sir, BTV-bashing seems to have become quite a popular sport over the last couple of years, the scrutiny becoming more intense with the onset of free elections and the coming to power of a democratic government. Sometimes, though by no means always, the criticism is well justified. At other times, questions should be asked that reach beyond the perimeters of the Rampura centre.

I go a month back. The evening news bulletins of the 7th of August reported on a purportedly surprise visit by the Prime Minister to a primary school on the outskirts of

Dhaka. Evidently it was not a surprise visit to the powers that be at BTV who were miraculously able to anticipate her and be there waiting in the cramped classroom to witness her arrival — film camera, lighting and sound equipment mad all that.

Does this mark a stunning precedence on the part of BTV? I regret the answer to this question is: No. What this and other such news items do in fact is allow the government to betray, semiconsciously and witlessly, its own sense of fragility through the very means it wishes to extend its ability to convince.

The French commentator on contemporary life, including the media, Baudrillard, described the evolution of print media coverage as comprising of four stages: 1) reflecting news, 2) masking news, 3) masking the fact that the news is being masked and 4) presenting simulacra as news. Even under the present democratic regime, BTV has not been allowed to progress even to the first of these stages. This is due plainly to the continuing control exerted over our television service by the Ministry of Information, which, it seems, enthusiastically subscribes to the Goebbels school of communication. Goebbels' first and last commandment was that if you repeat the same thing to people often enough, eventually they will begin to believe it.

I am confident of the talent and potential that rests within

Television Bhavan. And yes we are an infant democracy. But for how long will the infantile paranoia dull our television screens with its shadow? Abdul Hannan Crescent Road, Dhaka

Hooliganism

Sir, The vital soccer match between the two soccer giants recently has proved again that the soccer fans of our country cannot take a defeat like gentlemen. The controversial goal by Abahani flared the supporters of Mohammedan a.c. After the match the angry supporters inflicted a lot of damage on the nearby business centres, private organizations etc. The agitated mob also destroyed some private motor vehicles. This incident actually reflects the attitude of our soccer fans who cannot take a defeat easily. Whenever the team they support fails to win a game, they show their anger and irritation by breaking car windshield, destroying and ransacking shops. These supporters do not realize that in game one team has to lose and if that team is the one they support then they shall have to take the result calmly with sportsman spirit.

The police force deployed at the stadium to maintain law and order find it extremely difficult to control the in same mob. A sane person visiting the adjoining area of the Dhaka stadium would have thought that he had gone back to the

dark ages of barbarism.

The soccer supporters should change their mentality, otherwise the soccer matches should be held in an empty stadium. Rules may be made that if any soccer match ends in violence, the next five soccer matches should be held in an empty stadium. If the match between the two giants like the one in question ends in violence, then the next encounter between them should be held in an empty stadium. Taking these measures, at least violence can be avoided.

Touheed Feroze New Dhaka, Dhaka

Promotion scandal

Sir, The heinous promotion scandal that was enacted by the Council Committee in early 1992, is very well known throughout the length and breadth of the country. The matter came under scathing criticism in the press. The PM was embarrassed and she admitted in a meeting with the officers a few days after the incident that there could have been a mistake ranging from 20 to 30%. That the mistake would be rectified soon and officers need not go to court. But that was not to be. The matter was soon forgotten by the actors of the drama and eventually writs were filed in the High Court and cases in Administrative Appellate Tribunal by the affected officers. The High Court is yet to deliver its judgment. In

the meantime, the main supposedly actor of the drama was forced out by the PM from the cabinet. But the superseded affected officers remained where they were.

People are looking to the High Court for justice. Hundreds of officers with excellent service records were superseded for no fault of theirs through an eyewitness 'interview' lasting two/three minutes. Unless the High Court and Supreme Court rise to the occasion and rectify the high handedness of the Council Committee, people will have the feeling that even the semblance of justice is gone for good from this country.

Here is an humble suggestion. From each cadre a number of officers were promoted. If the same number of officers are promoted from that very cadre on the basis of seniority, dossier and ACRs that will be just, fair and ethical and there should be no reason for heart burning from any quarter. It may not be impertinent to mention here that if the Supreme Court of Pakistan can annul the order of the President on dissolution of Cabinet and Parliament in the interest of justice and fairplay, it should not be much of a problem for our High Court to annul an unjust and unethical promotion order. That will enhance also the image of the Supreme Court enormously.

Mrs Joyrab Begum Maitbag, Dhaka