

## JS goes into Autumn Session

Yet another session of the Jatiya Sangsad (JS) is on from today, one that is likely to be short, mainly to transact a number of routine official business. The JS has set a record of its own in being uneventful, from the point of the common people, especially of the rural population of the country. This is not the fault of the institution as such. It is just the question of members of the parliament not using this unique forum in the best possible manner for the good of the nation.

There are no immediate indications that the session starting today will be any different from the previous ones. However, there are some signs that a number of unresolved issues will figure prominently during the coming session and turn it into a stormy one. How this will be done within the parliamentary framework remains to be seen. For instance, the opposition Awami League (AL) feels obliged to press on for the repeal of the Indemnity Ordinance of 1975 and the curbing of the Terrorist Act of 1992. In all probability, there will be heated discussions on both, perhaps without producing any change in the situation. Here, some responsibility lies with the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to spell out clearly where the government stands on these two issues.

For past few weeks, official sources have published figures of alleged criminals dealt with under the Anti-Terrorism Act and that, as a result of the new draconian legislation, the crime rate has declined. In all probability, we will have a comprehensive statement from the Home Minister during the current session. The AL's charge that the Act has been used against political dissidents, especially those belonging to opposition, is a serious one and probably not without any basis. The operation of such laws — whether one calls them black laws or give them some other labels — is seldom, if ever, above political considerations. While the allegation of the opposition should certainly be examined carefully by the government, it is important that AL provides more details of its allegation, with names of opposition workers either detained or harassed under the Act.

The third divisive issue relates to the finalisation of the terms of references by the Special Parliamentary Committee which is to look at the allegation of corruption against the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation. In all probability, it will be a long drawn affair. At this stage, we do not want to speculate on the possibility that what started as an innovative and unique move by the parliament gradually acquires a secondary importance. On this score, we share the concern of opposition AL and urge the Speaker Shaikh Razzak Ali to give the matter his personal attention.

The parliament goes into session within weeks of significant changes in the political scenario in the country, such as the BNP Council Session; the formation of Gano Forum (GF) with six of its members sitting in the parliament; and the split in the Jatiya Party (JP). On the face of it, these changes may not have immediate impact on the parliamentary scene. However, in the long run, one cannot rule out the possibility of the BNP leadership taking an increasing notice of views of its rank and file heard during the Council session, within and outside the parliament. On the other hand, the 'think tank' set up by GF, with "portfolios" allocated among its leading members — that has been one of the favourite issues, like the need for national consensus — may well prompt AL to set up its own mechanism for a continuing in-depth understanding of national problems, without appearing to follow the lead of its own "dissidents".

## Cheap Paddy, Gloomy Prospect

The paradox that paddy sells at prices far below the production costs in a land where millions go hungry everyday does not seem to be disturbing many people's conscience, especially of those in the policy-making. But for the farmers actively involved in the production of paddy, this is a question of life and death. Today's price level of this staple food is deceptive, to say the least, and could very well compare with that of the Shyesta Khan's era, taking of course the money value. But sharp comes the uncomfortable reaction when the price of paddy is compared with those of other commodities, including agricultural produces. So the farmers' disillusion and disappointment may have a far-reaching impact on the country's economy.

The country is on the verge of producing enough food grains to meet its own need. Although this has not been possible without a price — indeed other protein-rich agricultural produces have been grossly neglected — the single-minded objective gives enough cause to celebrate. Yet signs appear to be clear that the whole thing might be upset soon. Land and labour-intensive, our agriculture has to face the double unequal competition from the industries enjoying technological support and the multinational agri-businesses. The government policy to withdraw subsidies from agriculture has not helped the cause.

In the face of such overwhelming odds, the agricultural produces, cereals in particular, have naturally become uncompetitive. Today reports from all corners of the country hold that the differences between the input for paddy and its prices range between Tk 50 to Tk 150 per maund (about 40 kg). The latest such report from Habiganj puts the price tag falling short by Tk 140-150 from the production cost. Needless to say that the disincentive of this low price for the farmers' main crop will force them to go for other cash crop fetching better return. Instead of attaining self-sufficiency in food, a very close reality, we may once again — and soon — turn into a food-deficit nation.

Before that gloomy prospect becomes a reality and we are forced to import costly foods, a market intervention to boost prices of rice is deemed very necessary. At the same time people must be helped to achieve more purchasing power through job cre-

W e are no doubt living in an exciting period of history. The collapse of Soviet Union as the bastion of communism and the end of Cold War are not the only epochal events that happened recently. We are about to witness another historic event which will, I am sure, change the course of history in a large and important region of the world. News about the secret accord reached between the PLO and Israel has sent a shock wave throughout the world. Admittedly it is a modest agreement and many difficulties may yet come up. Indeed the risks, both for PLO chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin are enormous. But the breakthrough in negotiation changes the whole context of bitter enmity that has characterized Arab-Israeli relations for over thirty years.

The agreement was not reached in Washington, where formal talks were going on for many months, but in Norway in secret talks which were discreetly arranged by the government of Norway. The agreement, according to available information, begins with interim self-government in the Gaza Strip and the city of Jericho in the West Bank. After the joint declaration takes effect the following steps will be taken:

(1) Within two months the two sides will sign an agreement on Israeli military withdrawal from Jericho and the Gaza Strip.

(2) Military withdrawal from Jericho and the Gaza Strip will be completed in a period no longer than four months after the agreement on withdrawal is signed.

(3) Within nine months direct elections for a representative council of Palestinians will be held. Israeli military forces will withdraw outside populated areas prior to elections for the council; further pull backs will occur as Palestinian police as-

## The Middle-East Problem: Do We See Light at the End of the Tunnel?

*At first sight the accord seems to be disappointing, certainly for the Arab cause. After all, the Arab cause is considered just and right by fair-minded people everywhere. Yet the terms seem to be too modest, almost insignificant in the context of three decades of Arab struggle against the occupation of their lands by the Israeli aggressors.*

sumes responsibility:

(4) The mandate for the initial representative council of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip will not exceed five years. Negotiations on the permanent status of the West Bank and Gaza Strip will begin not later than the start of the third year of the five years period.

At first sight the accord seems to be disappointing, certainly for the Arab cause. After all, the Arab cause is considered just and right by fair-minded people everywhere. Yet the terms seem to be too modest, almost insignificant in the context of three decades of Arab struggle against the occupation of their lands by the Israeli aggressors.

The people of Bangladesh, together with most people in the third world, will naturally take this view. But upon reflection one can see that the accord reflects the reality of the times. Both the parties have made major shifts from their rigidly held earlier positions under historic compulsions. For the PLO the compulsions were both international and regional in nature. The end of the Cold War, with the crumbling of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, deprived PLO of both the international diplomatic support and a steady and reliable source of military aid. Decline of the Non-Aligned Movement was another factor in reducing Arafat's stature and influence on the world stage. But Yasser Arafat's miscalculation in supporting Iraq in the Gulf war was a more immediate cause of his

difficulties which has deprived him of the much-needed financial assistance that he was getting from the Gulf states. The slump in oil price has made it difficult even for Arafat's remaining Arab friends to continue financial support at the old level. The support given by PLO to Saddam Hussein has also altered the attitude of many Western nations — especially European nations — who consider him less acceptable at the negotiating table. Finally, the Western liberals have

siege for all these years and they do not see any prospect for change unless a deal is struck with the PLO. Although they may not like to accept it, ordinary people of Israel are in fact tired and exhausted and are seeking a semblance of normality in their life. But the more immediate reason for the re-thinking on the part of Israel is the rise of the Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas, a fundamentalist organization which is committed to the destruction of Israel.

regard as a sell-off by Rabin. American Jewish groups, who have persistently opposed American dialogue with the PLO, are once again getting mobilized to sabotage the agreement.

Arab reaction against the secret deal has been equally quick and sharp. Radical Palestinian guerrilla leader Ahmad Jibril has issued a statement warning Arafat of the same sort of assassin's bullet that felled president Anwar Sadat of Egypt. Thus the hurdles yet to be crossed are many and quite serious. However it is clear that as far as the PLO leader Arafat is concerned, his options are very limited. If the agreement fails, PLO under chairman Yasser Arafat, which is how the world has known it for all these years, will no longer dominate the scene. For Israel the consequences of failure are likely to be different because a change of government will enable Israel to begin afresh its search for peace and security.

New York Times, in an editorial entitled, *Mideast: A Historic Deal*, hailed the accord and said, "It is hard to exaggerate the significance of these mortal enemies coming to terms. If the deal can be consummated, it will mark a breakthrough perhaps as dramatic as the Camp David agreements of 1978." A major question that remains unanswered is the response of the other Arab countries with a direct stake in the issue. Jordan, Syria and Lebanon have all vital interests

in the issue and they all have to be directly involved in the peace process if the region is to achieve its goal of durable peace. According to latest report King Hussein has rejected any agreement in which his kingdom was not a party. In fact he has called for an Arab summit to consider the whole issue. But he did not condemn the agreement and there are signs that Jordan will probably be the first country to make peace with Israel. Lebanon will also fall in line but no one yet knows how Syria will react. Will president Assad use his political and military influence as well as his diplomatic skill to sabotage the deal? No knows for certain but as a powerful actor on the Middle East stage no one can ignore him.

A major question, which has evoked considerable emotion in the past and on which the Arab and the Muslim world may hold Arafat accountable, is the fate of Jerusalem. As one of the holiest places of Islam the Muslim world will question the wisdom of deferring an agreement on Jerusalem for the future when the pressure on Israel will be eased by the interim agreement on Jericho and the Gaza Strip. The next few weeks are going to be crucial. Will president Clinton throw the full weight of American diplomacy behind the PLO-Israel deal? Given US-diplomatic efforts over the years for a settlement of the Mideast problem, it is most likely that the entire Western world including the United States will work for the success of the historic agreement. As the New York Times said, "America's own greatest interest in all this bargaining is enhanced security for Israel and a durable regional peace. Both those goals seem closer to achievement now than ever." A charismatic leader who has weathered many crises has gambled his political fortune on this deal. Perhaps it is the right move at the right time.

## ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

shifted their attention to the Muslims of Bosnia who are regarded by them as the more deserving under dogs who need help. At 64 Yasser Arafat has been at the helm of PLO for 23 years. Time, he must have reasoned, is against him. All these factors converged to force him to deal on Israel's terms, beginning with self-rule in the Gaza Strip and Jericho in the West Bank.

Prime Minister Rabin also faced a variety of pressures, equally compelling, which left him with few viable options. The most important issue for him is the fact that even after thirty years and spectacular victory in wars, the government was unable to provide security to the people. Israelis have been living in constant fear and a state of

According to observers of the Middle East scene, the secular PLO appears to be a moderate compared to the fanatical Hamas.

One may feel that Yasser Arafat has made a poor deal in which it is the Arabs who have made all the concessions. There seems to be much validity to these criticisms but one must remember that for thirty years Israel has stubbornly but successfully refused either to recognize or deal with PLO. Israel has shifted from this long held basic position as a major concession to the new reality in the region. It will not be easy for Yitzhak Rabin, 71 to get this accepted by the Parliament and the nation. Israeli hard liners have already launched a powerful agitation against what they

## Refugees Ebb and Flow in Southern Africa

by Elias Nyakutemba in Ndola, Zambia; John Gambanga in Mutare, Zimbabwe, and Leo Odera Omolo in Nairobi

Treaties are beginning to bring peace to two African countries — Mozambique and Rwanda. In each, refugees have begun to go home, though it will be three years before all the million displaced people are back in Mozambique. Yet as Rwandans go home Zaireans are moving across into Rwanda and others from Zaire are moving into Zambia — just as Mozambicans are leaving there. Gemini News Service reports on the ebb and flow of refugees in southern Africa.

### In search of security



others are returning home. Some 50,000-90,000 Angolans are still sheltering in the country because of the resumed civil war in Angola and new refugees are still coming in from far away places like Somalia.

Zambian Home Affairs Minister Newstead Zimba has only just signed an agreement with his Mozambique counterpart Roberto Antonio and the regional director of the United

Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), David Lamb, to repatriate 24,000 Mozambican refugees from Ukwima camp, east of Lusaka.

Lack of funds is a serious problem. Zambia needs \$1.5 million to repatriate the Mozambicans and now \$1 million more to cope with the Zaireans. In Kafubu camp conditions are poor. Half the refugees are children. Most are

undernourished and have never received immunity against disease.

Zambians have been looking after refugees for two decades now and they are weary of it. They hold Zaireans responsible for crime along the border such as smuggling food, car thefts and robberies.

In Zimbabwe the repatriation of Mozambicans has started. So far nearly 1,000 have gone back — the first of 140,000 to be repatriated under a UNHCR programme over two years. It is planned to repatriate over three years the total of 1,200,000 Mozambican refugees living in many countries within the region.

Lucia Sithole and her two daughters aged three and seven years are among the 140,000 refugees in Zimbabwe expecting to go home. Her husband died a year after the family fled. They are in Tongogara camp, in Chitungwiza, with 48,000 others.

Many are worried about returning to a home where all relatives have perished in the war against Alfonso Dhlakama's Renamo rebel movement. The accord signed in Rome last October and just reinforced by

the first meeting in Maputo of Dhlakama and President Joaquim Chissano, has brought a semblance of peace to Mozambique, but sporadic attacks on innocent civilians continue. Renamo forces seem reluctant to move into the designated assembly points.

By far the greatest number of refugees — more than a million — are in Malawi. The repatriation began in May and will continue for two years. In Swaziland it began in August and in Zambia and Tanzania it will begin next April.

A key worry is the issue of food. Although the UN World Food Programme (WFP) gives food to those returning at the time of their departure and for some time inside their native homes some are said to be going without.

Many Mozambicans are therefore not so keen to volunteer to go home. Said one: "We ran away because of starvation. We don't want that experience again. It's better we have a little food in here than go back home to hunger."

WFP director of operations Nicole Menga said: "Food is a key element in the repatriation."

WFP helps those returning with beans, vegetable oil, mealie meal and dried fish for the first few weeks until they settle down. The hope is that most Mozambicans will be back in time for the country's first multiparty election in October 1994.

The return of thousands of people displaced from Rwanda has now begun following the ending of three years of civil war there. Many left only last February when the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) launched an offensive.

They lived in the Demilitarised Zone, an area of 1,600 square kilometres taken over by the RPF in a battle following ethnic massacres. The situation is confused because as the Rwandans return home thousands of Zaireans have started streaming in.

Peace came to Rwanda as the result of a 300-page treaty signed in Arusha, Tanzania, by President Juvenal Habyarimana and RPF leaders Paul Kagame and Alexis Nsengiyawane.

Presidents Ali Mwinyi of Tanzania and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, as well as Dr Salim Ahmed Salim, Secretary-General of the Organisation of African Unity, which brokered the deal and put in an observer group, attended the signing. The UN agreed to send a force to Rwanda once the treaty was signed.

ELIAS NYAKUTEMBA is Zambian journalist. JOHN GAMBANGA is Editor of Manica Post in Mutare, Zimbabwe, LEO ODERA OMOLU is a Kenyan journalist.

## 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.

### Landing Card

Sir, in the past, while returning home from a foreign country, a Bangladeshi national at the home airport was required to fill up a Landing Card giving particulars about himself. As if his Passport was not enough to establish his identity, such a system was introduced. It is indeed very difficult to conceive that persons at the helm of affairs were with such degree of wisdom to have thought it prudent to prescribe such a requirement. It is gratifying to note that the system of furnishing a Landing Card for incoming Bangladeshi citizen has been waived. I take this opportunity to congratulate those who have found reason to do away with such a redundant system. One should expect that persons at various level of Administration should ensure that the business executed by them is proper and meaningful.

I Hossain Motiheen C/A, Dhaka.

### All are not rotten

Sir, in The Daily Star of 7th August, it was published that some of the old friends of Economics Honours '54 batch

gathered and spoke on different topics. The speakers compared their time in the campus with present, commenting that students at present are polluted with terrorism which is the product of politics. One of them said, "I don't think that today students' political groups have constructive roles." But, with due respect, I like to say that only two to three percent of students are related with campus violence in Dhaka University and for this minor portion, whole student community should not be blamed.

Nobody can deny that it is the student community which can claim the most of credit in the resignation of Ershad. I am not saying that everything on the campus is well, what I intend to mention is, the major portion of the students are free from all the unfair means and untoward occurrences on the campus, but they have never been highlighted. Only one of the speakers mentioned the case of exception.

With due honour to the respectable speakers of that gathering, I beg the opportunity to say that being one of the residential students, I have observed that many students do

not get full or even partial financial support from their family. Some of them are required to provide financial help to their family. As a result, they have to depend fully or partially on tuition and other part-time jobs which are not available easily. These students do not get time to spend for politics and other such activities. After the classes, they are to run to earn for their existence.

In spite of this they are determined to maintain a good result to get a job in future; only by dint of better result as because they lack any powerful lobby for the purpose. They have little time even for innocuous entertainment. In my Hall maximum of students can manage time only to enjoy the weekly drama on BTV.

I am also one in this group and therefore, I firmly deny the general accusation which is often made against Dhaka University students. Some one can say that exception is not the rule, well, but exception also deserves mention. Md Abdul Basher Surjana Hall, Dhaka University.

### Faulty drainage system

Sir, the 'underground drainage system' that was introduced in 1990 in the RK Mission Road and KM Das Lane area, has today turned into a 'curse' rather than a 'boon'. On even the slightest rainfall, roads submerge under knee-deep water. Till now the City Corporation authorities have taken

practical no steps to get the drains cleared at regular and close intervals — especially in the tract between the erstwhile Bengal Studio and the Chhayanabab crossing. Its condition is deplorable. It suffers over-flowing every now and then. The problem is so serious that it demands positive governmental action without further delay.