Dhaka, Tuesday, October 5, 1993

Need for Agricultural Reform

A report published yesterday in a government-Trust English daily says that loans meant for landless and marginal farmers in Netrakona are being channelised to benefit landlords and middleclass people through deceit and forgery. The influential and interested quarters have found ways to skirt around the pass-book system employed to release credit for the disadvantaged class. For the majority of the district's farmers still recovering from several visitations by floods this year, this latest inhuman treatment at the hands of their fellow beings has come as a great shock. Reeling under the cumulative effects of floods' devastation and the intense pressures from banks and other creditors for repayment of the loans made earlier and the uneconomic low price for rice, the farmers find themselves against overwhelming odds.

The tale of our farmers, specially small farmers, has always been poignant. This time their plight has been made worse by the uneconomic low price. Netrakona with its abnormal share of misery thanks to floods — in fact highlights the adverse environment in which the farmers pursue their profession. It is a most deplorable situation where the producers are deprived of a fair price and the middlemen take full advantage of whatever government patronage is available there. Earlier the government decision to withdraw subsidy from agricultural inputs and implements also adversely affected the small farmers and the landlords reaped benefits in the process.

In Netrakona, the landlords have resorted to malpractices evidently with the motive of tightening their stranglehold. While the farmers are in desperate need for newer loans, they have been served notices for repayment of their earlier loans. Being pushed to the brink, they now sell their lands at a nominal price. The vicious circle is about to be complete. Land so lost to the non-farmers has only one implication: these farmers will soon join the huge army of landless farmers and will be forced out of their ancestral homesteads to trek to an urban centre. Nothing will be a greater casualty than Bangladesh's impetus for achieving self-sufficiency in food. Predictions are already gloomy. That the government is giving a second thought to making a few concessions for the farmers in the matter of procuring fertilizer, pesticides etc shows how preposterous the step to withdraw all subsidies from agricultural inputs was.

Disenchanted farmers have seen year after year how the successive governments have let their cause down. Neither have they much confidence in the politicians. The Awami League-initiated move to save the hard hit farmers seems to have run out of steam. Now 10 left-leaning parties are making .this an issue, but otherwise the farmers are a neglected species. And this is not the way of treating the most productive segment of society. Till now agriculture contributes the majority of our economy and the small farmers and the marginal ones prove many times productive compared to the big farm-

No doubt, the present flawed agricultural policy cannot give the small farmers the patronage they deserve. Land reform will be the first step towards making agriculture competitive. Industries have devoured crores of Taka without substantially contributing to the country's economy, rather in most cases staggering losses have forced their unceremonious disinvestment. Viewed from this point, agriculture coupled with agro-industries hopefully spread all over the country, can not only provide the much-needed boom for agricultural growth but also create opportunities for a large number of employment. Making agriculture uneconomic, we stand to doubly lose and its chain reaction is certain to escalate, jeopardising the very survival of the society. It is advisable to address the problem where it is, not by inviting it to the cities which are under heavy pressure already.

Murder after Murder after ...

Two persons were murdered in Dhaka city on Sunday just several hours after a businessman was gunned down in a crowded city street and in broad daylight — on Saturday. The Sunday murders took place in Mirpur within 14 hours of one another. Yunus Morol, a cloth dealer, was beaten to death by people he was having a business tussle with. And Palash, a new entrant to the Dhaka College, was shot dead by a gang of youngsters after a nightmarish chase. This too on a street and in the afternoon.

September, combining half and half of the two bright autumn months of Bhadra and Ashwin, was the most crime crowded month in so many months. The October outlook seems to be still bleaker. In the two decades after independence, we have learnt to live with violence and unnatural death. Road traffic death has become so routine that one hardly takes any notice of them in the newspapers. And Dhaka is the city where Soghra and Mona and Zaheer- all 'classy' people, headed by Mrs Ahad, the most refined of them all - were killed with impunity. The press makes splashes of such killings but hardly the average man as much as bat an eyelid. We have been inured of violent death first by the million-slaying Pak genocide and then by our own little bursts of homicide on a smaller scale but in an unceasing manner. What distinguishes the homicidal situation in this city is, there is hardly any social protest and resistance and necessary police overdrive to contain and curb the murder pattern. Why?

Perhaps effective ways to counter the current trail of murder would be found in a sincere attempt to answer that query. Societal decay is a sure component of that answer but is too generalised to be meaningfully used. A little more pointed contributing factor is the fact of the government's failure to own its share of responsibility in the matter. Society, and in particular this capital city, is the charge of the government on the saddle. Whatever evil visits there must first be engaged by government. Failing to cope with all kinds of murder and assassinations, the government seems to have recoiled into a cozy sanctuary of indifference. That's not simply the way we deserve to be governed. We want to have a Dhaka far better than it is at present, firstly in human terms. The government owes it to us.

and its not just passing clouds but clouds with their separate identities lost in a general mass of continuous grey covering the entire sky. For the time of the year, it's not quite seasonable. In fact, the season should give us a blue sky, and white, fleecy clouds which Rabindranath likened to newborn calves that have just had their fill of mother's milk, and are now basking in the sun. We have had glimpses of that, the Autumnal sky-scape, only to be overtaken by the lingering Monsoon. This year, monsoon came somewhat early, in May, then slackened a list in June when it should be at its primal best, and then made good the loss when it returned in July. and remained with us, giving us more than expected, and promising, I am told, a bumper 'aman' crop. Should that actually happen - a bumper aman crop - we should be ready to forgive all its excess, and forget all the inconveniences it must have caused. A bumper crop means a winter of contentment for our people, a brief season of happiness for our hardworking peasantry, something they richly deserve in a life otherwise

TS a pouring sky today.

full of want and privation Why did I start in this vein, I ask myself. My mind is full of thoughts, stray and disjointed. as it happens before a journey abroad. Another trip to Pakistan, starting on the 30th September, and another round of experiences connected with observing a national election in that country, but may be, not

ELENA Yakovitch is a 33-

Hyear-old Muscovite. She is married and has a dau-

ghter, Anna, 6. Helena is a

journalist with the Literatu-

rnaya Gazetta. Albert, her

husband, used to work at an

army plant but was laid off and

now works as a technical

loving husband, and a beautiful

daughter; and with a monthly

income slightly above the aver-

age in Russia, Helena should

have been a happy woman but

for one thing. She is a Jew -

and more aware of it by the day.

my daughter's age religious

practice was forbidden I only

The Jews living in the

felt Russian. Now things are dif-

Commonwealth of Independent

States (CIS) are going through a

rough time. Some problems are

shared with the rest of CIS citi-

zens. They are mainly eco-

nomic. Others are peculiar to

the Jews as a minority group,

like the growing feeling of anti-

rest of their countrymen.

though. They have a place to go

well-educated, want to emi-

grate. Given the problems they

option for many is not attrac-

programme the economies of

the former Soviet states are in a

mess. Statistics put the number

of CIS citizens living below the

poverty line at 80 per cent. The

deteriorating economic situation

affects everyone. Anti-Semitism

is a problem of a completely dif-

has political dimensions. It is

not just directed at the Jews as

an ethnic minority. It is, rather,

the vehicle through which cer-

tain groups express their frus-

tration and anger at the pre-

sent situation in the CIS re-

The current wave in the CIS

ferent nature.

Despite the economic reform

to. Yet not all, especially the

Jews are better off than the

Says Helena: "When I was

With a respectable job, a

schoolteacher.

ferent."

Semitism.

Elections and Observers

Is this business of 'observing' an election by a group of people committed to the concept of a civil society worth its while, or is it all an exercise in futility? The groups go with the best of intentions, but work under conditions, partly or largely set by the local authorities.

quite the same experience which we had two years ago. Is it two years or three. I forget, and I do not care to check the dates. The past, even the nottoo-distant past, is all blurred into a dull sameness, as the sky is today.

Observing an election by a group of supposedly impartial people, concerned with the problems and prospects of democracy, especially in the fledgling democracies of South Asia and Africa, has, by now, become an established convention. I have joined and worked with two such groups in the past, first in Pakistan, and then in Sri Lanka. In the first case, the members were drawn from the SAARC group of nations President Ishaq Khan's govern ment took care to demonstrate that they welcome all foreign observers. We were not the only group. A much larger group (the NDL) also multina tional in its composition, and a smaller French group completed the scene. We all shared the same purpose: to see for our selves if the elections were fair. if the election machinery was working in the manner expected of it, and, on the election day, if freedom prevailed in the polling booths, and, after the polling, if the counting was conducted in

the manner prescribed by the Election Commission. Meeting the press, and leaders of the contending parties was part of the agenda we had set for our selves, on both the occasions. This proved to be the difficult part of the work, as leaders we wanted to meet would be most of them away, busy with their own work of last minute campaigning. In Pakistan, we met

Commissioner himself had invited us, and had drawn the programme of our visits. Special care had to be taken for our security. The law and order situation had improved, but not to the extent one would like to see. Two areas where the Tamils were still a threat, the North and the North East, were kept

little different. The Chief Election

PASSING

of PPP and of the combined Islamic Opposition, listened to the anxieties of the one, and the confident assertions of the other, and, in our leisure, went through the clipping of the newspapers made available to us in a desperate attempt to understand things. I call it desperate, because the political situation in Pakistan appeared to me then, as it appears to me now, very entangled indeed. One sees the leaders, but the followers one hardly meets, or is able to communicate with. As for the government, there is no lack of courtesy. Words are smooth and reassuring, but the

The Shri Lanka case was a

face is inscrutable.

outside the scape of the electhe press, met the spokesmen tions. Apart from the security CLOUDS Zillur Rahman Siddiqui that was attached to us individually, we were provided with a guide, and the guides were drawn from the university faculty or from NGOs. The um-

brella provided by the govern-

ment for our movements was

both unavoidable and un-com-

fortable, it seriously restricted

our freedom. Both in Pakistan and in Shri Lanka, there was a government in power; in both cases there was an opposition full of complaints, bringing serious charges of omissions and commissions; in both countries we had elaborate rules drawn up by the Election Commission to ensure free and fair elections. And in both cases there was no doubt left in our minds as to which side the Establishment and the Administration was favouring. As it turned out, those already in power came out victorious, and it was left for the complaining opposition to add one more complaint regarding the fairness and impartiality of the entire procedure.

And that brings us face to face with the crucial question: is this business of observing an election by a group of people committed to the concept of a civil society worth its while, or is it all an exercise in futility? The groups go with the best of intentions, but work under conditions, partly or largely set by the local authorities. Sometimes, these are serious limitations under which the groups have to move and to work. The presence of the government impinges on the freedom of the groups. There is a limit to the 'transparency'; there soon arrives a stage where transparency halts. The groups can draw up a preliminary report before leaving, leaving the elaborate report to be prepared at leisure. This we did in Pakistan. Or, alternatively, the group can draw a final report. based on the separate reports sub-groups, and a series of dis- in an election scenario.

cussions leading to a consensus, and then disperse. We followed the latter course in Shri Lanka, and this was imposed upon us because there was no Centre behind this Commonwealth group of observers. Observers are not monitors.

and this has to be emphasised. if only to remove misconceptions and misapprehensions. Observing an election is a delicate job, needing lot of finesse. lost of circumspection Observers are not able to do miracles; at most, they can put a brake on an unbridled lawlessness. The host governments feel obliged not only to provide them with reasonable facilities for their work, but actually needs them, in as much as they need the good opinion of the world. The so-called free-world of today perhaps is a little more free now than it was before the break up of the Soviet Union The leaders of this world may be more genuinely concerned with the cause of democracy in Asia and Africa than it was in the past. In other words, they can make a common cause with the forces for a civil society in many of these Afro-Asian countries than they could afford to in a bi-polar world. And this makes the mission of the observers a little more meaningful than it would normally be. Even a perceptible improvement in the democratic sensitivity of the ruling powers is a considerable gain. I am inclined to believe that this is bound to happen prepared by individuals and with foreign observers present

Jews Seek Promised Land in Post-Soviet Russia

Ahmed Badawi writes from Moscow

The Middle East peace deal will undermine Jewish emigration to Israel, especially from the former Soviet Union. Since the early 1970s, when Moscow loosened its immigration policy, about 750,000 Jews have immigrated to the West and to Israel. The mainly secular Russian Jews find it difficult to adapt to Israel's religious way of life. Despite a rise in anti-Semitism many Russian Jews are seeking their promised land in the country of their birth.

The Diaspora There are 14 million Jewish people in the world. These are the top ten communities 5,950,000 42.5 % Percentage 0.6 % of global Jewish

are likely to face in Israel, the publics, particularly Russia. The nationalists blame the

population

Jews for bringing the Soviet Union into existence. Loyal to the old Russian empire, the nationalists believe that the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was an imperialist-Zionist conspiracy to bring the empire to its knees.

The Communists blame the Jews for architecturing perestroika, which they say caused the disintegration of the empire

and led to Western domination. Michael Chlenov, President of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress and co-President of Vaad, the Confederation of Jewish Organisations and

Communities, says all minorities, not just the Jews, participated in the 1917 revolution.

Before that, Russia was known as the prison of the minorities. There was great hope that the new regime might give those minorities some freedom. It did so for a while but, especially during and after the Stalin era, the communists turned out to be as ruthless as

the Tsars. This is why CIS Jews wholeheartedly back the political reforms of perestroika. Democracy. Chlenov explains. is one of the conditions to ensure the survival of any minority. With mounting anti-

Semitism, any setback to the economic and political reforms would mean disaster for the

Anti-Semitism is strong in Russia, but not so much in other CIS republics. In the Islamic republics, for instance, the prejudice is against Russians in general, who are regarded as colonialists. whether Jews or not. And in the Baltic states, which have closer ties with the West, anti-Semitism is almost non-exis-

Even in Russia the Jews are a lot safer than, for example, the North Africans in France or the Turks in Germany. Actually.

with autonomy for Palestinians in the occupied territories, CIS Jews seem safer than the Jews living in the West Bank or Gaza.

Yet, the holocaust still vivid in Jewish minds, they are taking the threats seriously. This, coupled with severe economic problems and dreams of a better life elsewhere, is why some CIS Jews want to emigrate.

Since the early 1970s, when Moscow loosened its emigration policy, about 750,000 Jews have made it either to the West or to Israel - more than half in the last two years.

Alexander Libin, Israeli Embassy official in Moscow, said: There is an upsurge. We help in-avery possible way and so far we have had no problems. Should any arise, we will solve

Hundreds of Jews apply to emigrate every day, not just to Israel but to countries such as United States and Germany. Most end up in Israel, simply because it is the country that accepts them most readily. According to the Israeli Law of Return, any person who can prove that he/she is a Jew, a descendant from a Jewish famfly, or married to a Jew, has the right to move to Israel and automatically become an Israeli

citizen. There are still those like Helena Yakovitch who are not sure whether they want to leave. "I'm deeply rooted in Russia. I belong here and I have a respectable position in soci-

Many CIS Jews, especially those in metropolitan cities like Moscow or Kiev, consider themselves a part of the intelli-

gentsia: journalists, university professors, high government of ficials, artists. They are at tached culturally and emotion ally to their country.

Lack of any religious education or ethnic expression for more than 70 years of communist rule has helped to reinforce this. Going to Israel for them is an adventure they are reluctant to undertake.

That does not mean Israel is unimportant for them, but, as Roman Spktor, head of the Jewish Cultural Centre in Moscow, puts it: "CIS Jews can contribute more to Israel from here as part of the intelligentsia, as respectable citizens. rather than from there as poor refugees.

The economic situation is a major problem facing immigrants in Israel: soaring inflation, high unemployment, and lack of funds needed to absorb them. Perhaps the most serious problem CIS Jews face in Israel is that of adaptation.

U:Those Jews know little about . their religion and its practices and traditions. The life of an ex-Soviet Jew was centred around secular institutions within the framework of the Soviet system. In Israel religious institutions play an important role in social

After the collapse of communism, more than 350 Jewish organisations were founded all over the CIS. Synagogues were reopened in all major cities. Classes in Hebrew and studies in Jewish life and history have been started. The whole community seems to be heading towards a renaissance of its val-

ues and identity. The aim, according to Chlenov, "js to ensure the survival of ex-Soviet Jews, right here in the CIS, as a part of world Jewry, and to provide them with a safe, decent homeland." - GEMINI NEWS

AHMED BADAWI is an Egyptian freelance journalist who recently visited Russia.

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.

6th Asian Art Biennale

Sir, As long as Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin was alive he never took his seat at the Institute of Arts and Crafts, Dacca; once he stopped considering himself the Principal of that College. The Vice-Principal worked as the Acting Principal and carried out the daily routine work. As long as Zainul was alive he never had a solo exhibition in Bangladesh nor did he ever participate in any kind of exhibition at the Shilpakala Academy. He never hid the fact that our people did not know how to appreciate talent nor had the mentality to change or mould their nature.

There was a time when Runa Laila was not allowed to participate in the Radio and Television programmes of Bangladesh on the ground the lady had not "passed through the test formalities as per Government Rule." After all no government rule can be broken or by-passed. That is

But what has gone wrong with the Shilpakala Academy? The 6th Asian Art Biennale for the local Artists has been axed to a limit that would even put to shame our national artist

Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin! With the country enjoying democracy and the Prime Minister occasionally proclaiming the administration's sincerity for genuiñe priority to real talents of our sons and daughters of the soil, specially in the field of art, let an artist, any artist, participate in the 6th Asian Art Biennale. Lack of space is only a convenient lame excuse. An exposition of this kind can be displayed in quite a number of places or 'galleries', after all, our capital is no more the tiny world the Academy authorities might still believe!

Mujibul Haque Sobhanbag, Dhaka

Sir, The Shilpakala Academy is going to hold its 6th Biennale from November 2 to 30, 1993. A very good attempt. However, the rules and regulations set by the concerned authorities appear to be unwise and unfair. It is against the very interest for which the Academy boasts of arranging such international exhibitions.

The rules and regulations bar a would be aspirant, who has not had two group exhibitions at the National level or one at the Biennale, from participating in the exhibition. This also means anyone holding a Doctorate Degree in Arts or a new but talented Artist cannot

participate. In two years' time so much developments take place and so many talents discover themselves. So why set a rule that disqualifies a genuine artist?

It is hoped the Shilpakala Academy shall make amends and allow new comers to participate in the 6th Biennale exhibition.

Begum Nadira Banoo DRA, Dhaka

Elections in Pakistan

Sir, Elections are coming up in Pakistan. And once again the members of Ahmadiyya Muslim community are unable to take part in these elections. The reason is very interesting: The Government of Pakistan wants to force the Ahmadi-Muslims las the members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community are called) to stand for elections for seats reserved for the non-Muslim minorities in Pakistan. The Ahmadi-Muslims however, believing in the tenets of Islam, want to vote for the majority Muslim seats.

This argument has been going on in Pakistan since 1974 when the late President Zulfigar Ali Bhutto started misusing religious sentiments for political ends. Subsequent presidents were either unable or unwilling to change this, perhaps preferring to misuse religion for politics themselves.

The world-wide Ahmadiyya Muslim community, including . its branch in Bangladesh are now appealing to the interim administration in Pakistan, which is overseeing the elec-

tions, to get rid of this law dating back to 1974 as well as a further Martial Law Ordinance of 1984, and restore religious freedom in Pakistan to all its citizens.

Nuruddin Amjad Dhanmondi R/A, Dhaka.

"Myopic view of history"

Sir, Your editorial 'Myopic

view of history' (23 Sept) is indeed an attempt to call a spade a spade. Emphasis on Ahsan Manzil seems to be overstressed. Before we drain out our exchequer for the face-lift or interior decor of this building. should we not consider who were the Nawabs of Dhaka. what was their origin, what was their role in society and how old was this much-publicized Manzil? For sheer power and pelf a merchant became a zamindar and for his unqualified loyalty to the British Raj when Sepoy Mutiny failed but the spirit of liberty among the masses could not be subdued. he was titled as Nawab and thus greatness was thrust upon him — to put it in a Shakespearian way. Of course, many institutions were named in Dhaka after the so-called Nawabs. But were they philanthropists? Had they any real contribution to institutions? No heresy please! Let us know the fact. Would Professor Muntasir Mamun or some other re-

throw some light on it? On the other hand, we should not forget that Nawabs of Dhaka initiated the birth of the Muslim League. Bangla-

searcher like him be pleased to

desh, however, discarded the theory of communal division and emerged as a secular state out of an armed struggle. Yes, hero-worship is ingrained in man. But were the Nawabs of Dhaka heroes at all?

Arman Shahryar Kazla, Rajshahi

Death of a monarch

Sir, The sad transition of a long celebrated personality like Belgian monarch does leave a void behind in the world community which takes long to be filled in.

The condolence message from Bangladesh on the demise of the European king emphasized the cordiality alive between these two states.

Belgian aids to Bangladesh's development activities have been very important over the

The recent imperial award to a Bangladeshi rural bank for its credit programme on women's employment generation has uplifted this nations' spirit to progressive living.

Despite European Community's unforeseen position on her flood control projects, the protocols are expected to continue honoring mutual terms with Euro-states. While the whole world can

look forward to share the fruits of unified Europe — or United States of Europe — someday, Asian LDC Bangladesh can only expect more helps especially from the home of EC headquar-

M Rahman Zila School Road, Mymensingh

Plant-based food

Sir, Many of us tend to hold some kind of negative views about vegetarian diets. We often think that a vegetarian's health is always in jeopardy for the lack of protein and iron in his food. May be it is one of the reasons why Bangladesh being an agrarian country with a variety of plants and vegetables has not been a land of a large number of vegetarians.

But the experts, especially in the US, are lately of opinion that a well-planned vegetarian diet - even one without eggs and dairy products - can provide all necessary nutrients. They feel liberated and vindicated with each health report praising plant-based diets.

Moreover, they seem to nag meat-eaters to watch what they eat as favourite dish. Meanwhile, the veggie burgers are outselling beefburgers and hamburgers in some posh restaurants of the US. An estimated eight million to 12 million of Americans are said to have embraced vegetarianism.

It may be worth mentioning here that the risk of heart problem, cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis and such other diseases is reduced for people who eat plant-based diets. From the physical stand-point vegetarians are in general leaner than the meat-eating people. They are found to have lower death rates from several chronic diseases, lower blood pressure and lower cholesterol levels.

Nittin Roy Faktrerpool, Dhaka