

Option for Taka Convertibility

Last Thursday, we published the full text of the discussions at The Daily Star Roundtable on Taka Convertibility held on September 28. Going through these proceedings, we find that if not the entire gamut, nearly all the vital issues surrounding convertibility, came to be aired out at the table. The rationale for convertibility was explained and its parameters laid down. Factors that have a bearing on convertibility such as macro-economic situation, monetary and fiscal policy, balance of payments, even good governance, were brought up. Implications of convertibility for transactions in goods and services, inflation, capital movement and investment were analysed. Maybe, the issues that were raised, concerns and misgivings that were voiced, were not all settled at the table. However, articulate presentation and forthright discussion provided a rare insight into the factors that underpin the problems. We stand better informed now.

The texture of convertibility naturally dominated the proceedings. It was known that in the first phase, the move would embrace transactions in goods and services only or, in other words, it would be a case of current account convertibility. Probes were directed at gauging the extent of liberalisation from the bounds of exchange control regulations in these areas. For instance, would the exporters be able to retain all their earnings in foreign currency? Will the limitations on education abroad be removed? The answer in general terms was that current account will be fully convertible and foreign exchange available for any current account transaction.

The question of conversion rate generated lively discussions. Business leaders generally seemed to favour fully market-oriented exchange rate and thought that Taka should be put on a free float. Officials and some of the bankers, on the other hand, argued for a managed float and daily fixation of exchange rate with reference to the buying and selling rates of the central bank. They advised caution and advocated for gradualism in the interest of avoiding volatility of the currency market and ensuring an orderly transition. Apprehensions were expressed that in a free float situation, speculators could assume an upper hand in the foreign exchange market. This, they felt, would lead to confusion and destabilisation. This line of argument, however, did not convince most of the participants. It was pointed out that conversion of the currency and the rate of its exchange were interlinked and that true convertibility came from market determined rates. Concerns were expressed that fixing exchange rates under the guiding hand of the central bank would prolong the existence of a parallel currency market, impairing the growth of confidence in convertibility itself. Be that as it may, unless the policy makers change their outlook between now and the actual launching of convertibility on current account, it does seem that it is a managed float for Taka which would prevail. Given this outcome, it is important that the mechanism for determining currency conversion rates in managed float regime are made more explicit for the benefit of users of foreign exchange.

The modality for obtaining forward cover in foreign exchange transactions is another critical issue raised at the roundtable. The importance of providing importers, exporters and the industry a ready access to forward-cover facility was rightly stressed at the meeting. On earlier occasions too, we had pleaded that a streamlined forward-cover mechanism should be put in place. As for curbing speculation in forward-cover operations, discussions at the roundtable yielded the information that in India, currency market operators, taking forward positions, are required to have an underlying trade transaction. This practice could serve well in our case too. In addition, an adequate reporting system and free flow of information will help not only forward-cover operations but the emerging foreign exchange market as a whole.

The roundtable on convertibility also yielded useful information of allied topics such as foreign portfolio investments and interest-rate implications for flow of funds. All in all, we feel enriched in knowledge from the perceptive analysis of the convertibility issue at the forum. We hope our readers would agree.

A Welcome Action

Production of polythene shopping bags for local consumption would stop in three months' time. The cabinet on Monday decided that manufacture of these would thus be 'restricted'. The factories now can go on producing the stuff exclusively for foreign markets. And it is only the shopping bag that would not be anymore manufactured from polythene. A hundred other uses of polythene no less harmful than the shopping bags, apparently do not come under the ban.

The cabinet decision was prompted by a proposal of the Ministry of Environment and Forest. Much pronounced and direct harm the stuff has caused to soil quality and irrigation and sewerage, making the nuisance an ideal case to be dealt with by the Agriculture Ministry and the municipal corporations. Why didn't they act? Or did they fail to feel where it hurt, how it hurt? As for the cabinet whose charge is this whole nation, and nothing short of it — what made it to go so tentatively about this banning business?

The government decision keeps us guessing on two important points. What has the government thought about the substitution of the polythene bags by now being used universally by all the shops in the nation — and the shoppers? Where would the substitutes come from — and in a bulk not to leave a vacuum anywhere?

The government would love to repose on the new-found panacea of market forces to care about that. But who will protect the poor shopper from the profiteers who have been offered out of blue such a chance of a life time?

The banning of the polythene bag is only one of a myriad challenges to environment crying for remedial action. While government deserves to be congratulated on its first environment-friendly action, the question naturally comes to mind of the remaining items on the card. Vehicles belching out black smoke is a very good — or bad — case from among those. The government has not moved even a little finger against these so far. Not one vehicle in the whole of the country has been penalised on that count although it must be about more than 70 per cent of them that throw up tons of carbon monoxide and other toxic effluents into the atmosphere of this poor nation.

TEMEGLONG is an un-ruly Indian frontier territory in southern Manipur, skirting Burma. Like the wild West, it bristles with guns, rivalries and recklessness. Thick forests, hilly terrain and uncharted border make it an ideal place for every conceivable illicit activity. New Delhi has never been able to administer it, before or after independence. A contingent of the Assam Rifle is stationed there but more to register India's presence than to implement its laws.

Conscious of government's feebleness, the Muiwah faction of Nagas struck here first. It has killed more than 300 Kukis, the age-old rivals. The Muiwah have pushed their fire of vengeance to other habitations of Kukis, mostly in southern Manipur, killing, looting and burning practically without any resistance.

They have also shown whose writ runs in the area by collecting toll from every vehicle plying between Imphal, Manipur's capital, to distant Silchar in Assam. They have given receipts for the money realised.

The Union cabinet met 10 days after the first incident and till then only Home Ministry's special secretary had gone to Manipur. The discussion to take over the administration from the state was held many days later. The delay in deployment of forces, as one top official puts it, "worsened the situation."

But this is nothing new. The government has always been late in putting its act together. Even an intelligence report about the making of an ambush gets so embroiled in red tape that the army action begins three or four days after the first information is received.

Rivalries in the Distant North East

The Government of India acts like a fire brigade, putting out flames whenever and wherever it erupts. This has helped to the extent that many fires have been quenched but embers continue to burn. The criss-cross of accords in the area fail to hide the alienation and uneasy peace beneath.

There were enough straws in the wind to warn the government that the Muiwah were on the prowl. They had killed last year Onkhoel Hantik, a Kuki youth, who had organised resistance against the Muiwah's extortion in the name of 'loyalty tax.' They had also administered several warnings to the Kukis to vacate southern Manipur which, they claim, is part of 'sovereign independent Nagaland.'

The Kukis are a brave tribe but over the years they have given up violence and have come to depend on the government for their security. The recent incidents have shook them up and they are now collecting arms, either by wlaying the police or capturing their armory. They are bound to retaliate one day because, like the jats in Punjab and the Reddys in Andhra Pradesh, the Kukis nourish their vengeance and pass it on to the next generation.

The Muiwah have, however, an advantage: they operate from Burma, which is hostile to the Kukis for more than one reason. The other day the Kukis humiliated the Burmese army when only half a dozen of their youths disarmed one of its contingents, which had strayed into Manipur. Rangoon's other grievance is that the homeland the Kukis demand includes some territory of Burma.

Both Kukis and the Muiwah are Christians. The council of

Baptist churches of north-eastern India has tried to intervene. But they can effect truce, not solution because when it comes to the Kukis, the Muiwah care little for religious ties. They have attacked them even on Good Friday in a church during the prayers.

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area fail to hide the alienation and uneasy peace beneath. In fact, the solution of certain agitations has given birth to some other uprisings.

Take the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) At one time, it looked as if Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia had pulled through a settlement which was impossible to imagine. But it turns out that most hardcore among them have not surrendered. The recovery of weapons has been limited; the suspicion is that the arms were passed on to those who are defying the law. The surrendered lot, which calls itself the SULFA (S is for surrender), is behaving

have come to wield unlimited power in the name of counter-acting the insurgency. The process of decentralisation, promised in every accord, has not even begun to let the glow of governance reach the grassroots.

The militancy has not lessened. In fact, it is getting coher-

ence. Groups under different nomenclatures are joining hands against the security forces. In sharp contrast, the government lacks consistency. There is no integrated approach, much less concerted action. Agreements have been left hanging, hoping that time will rivet them. Even where specifics have been worked out, the tendency is to overlook their violation.

The government has not tried to probe even the differences that have developed among the militant groups. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), comprising the two Naga factions, Muiwah and Khaplang, have stuck to their opposition to the Nagaland's integration with India. But Phizo's successors have been reportedly willing to accept a status within the Indian Union. Phizo in the last few years of his life in London had come to reconcile to Nagaland becoming part of India under some conditions.

The People's Liberation Front (PLF), the main Meitei extremist body in the Imphal valley, has got split into two factions. One is fighting against liquor, drugs and crime against women and the other is maintaining links with insurgent groups in Burma. The first one is retrievable. Senior leaders can still be used to wean away the youth from the militant and parochial outfits that have recently come up in Tripura (All Tripura Tribal Force), Meghalaya (the

structures in operation around the world. The British government itself is currently grappling with a case involving the shooting of members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Gibraltar by a British undercover military unit — and the case is being heard at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France.

Case from other nations may be brought before the International Court of Human Rights in The Hague, Holland.

For the countries which still use the JPC, there are advantages to having the final court of appeal in another country. For one thing, it is a valuable resource — where cases can be considered by highly trained people — effectively free of charge. As well as this, an external court is likely to be seen as impartial and free from local emotions.

Many Caribbean lawyers are fond of the system, Mr Justice James Davis, a West Indian judge, speaking about the system on BBC television, said: 'I think it has served us very well. I am reluctant to opt for change merely to localise the concept of having a final court of appeal which is West Indian in character.'

Trinidadian lawyer Gregory Dezin said on the same programme: 'Most of the development of constitutional jurisprudence here has derived from the decisions of the Privy Council itself rather than the Trinidad and Tobago Court of appeal.'

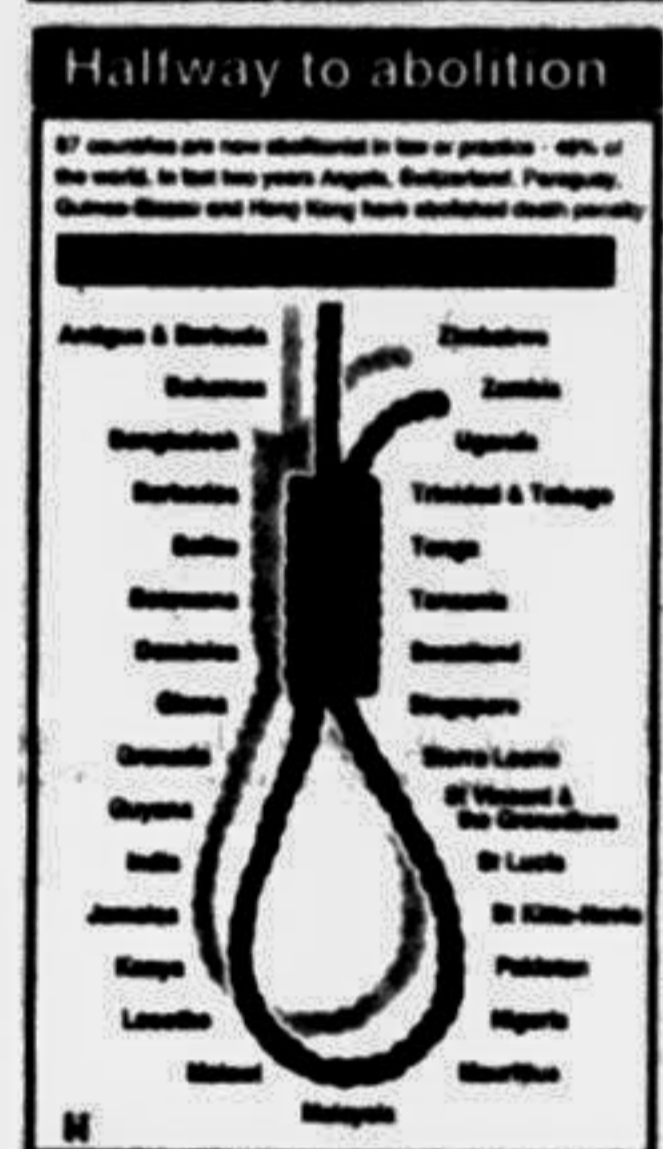
Many Commonwealth citizens would be only too happy to see the disappearance of this archaic neocolonial institution. Others want to see it preserved, as a guardian of basic human rights and judicial fairness. Earl Pratt and Ivan Morgan belong in the second group. — GEMINI NEWS

NICHOLAS SHAXSON is a British freelance journalist.

Death Row Prisoners Wait for Law Lords

Nicholas Shaxson writes from London

For several Commonwealth countries the Privy Council in London is still the final court of appeal, a link that remains from the days of the British Empire. The Council is made up of Law Lords — judges from the House of Lords — and it is about to pronounce a verdict on the case of two of more than 100 prisoners held on Death Row in Jamaica. Their decision could affect prisoners in several other countries, including Zimbabwe.



employ the services of such people.

Pratt and Morgan were convicted of murder by a Jamaican court and sentenced to death in 1979. The Jamaican Court of Appeal rejected their appeal but took nearly four years to formalise their decision — a delay which prevented them from lodging an appeal with the JCPC.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee recommended in 1989 that their sentences should be commuted.

The two men challenged their death sentence on the grounds that executing them would constitute cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in view of the time they have spent on death row. The JCPC in London is now considering whether this time should be considered excessive delay.

Conditions could indeed be described as barbaric on Death Row in Jamaica. Over 100 prisoners are kept in cells, measuring about three metres long and two metres wide, for 23 hours in a day in conditions described by a local judge as 'appallingly barbaric.' Prisoners suffer from acute anxiety, depression and even madness. It is not hard to understand why.

The fate of other condemned prisoners hangs on the decision of the London judges. If the law says that four year's delay is too long for these two men, that will mean that four years is too long for anybody. A case in Zimbabwe has been delayed until after the JCPC's decision on the Pratt and Morgan case.

Amnesty International, the human rights organisation, has said that one of the most disturbing aspects about the cases of Pratt and Morgan is that if their appeal is rejected it will clear the way for a resumption of executions which have not been seen in Jamaica since 1988. Amnesty is opposed to the death penalty in all cases.

The last hangings in Trinidad and Tobago were in 1979, although the death penalty can still be applied for murder. But there is rising public pressure for a resumption of the executions in response to the explosion of crime in the Caribbean.

Guyana resumed executions in 1985 after a 13-year moratorium. This June four executions were carried out there in the space of a week.

One of the most controversial episodes in Trinidad's recent history involved the JCPC. On July 27, 1990, a man calling himself Yasin Abu Bakr, with 113 Black Muslim supporters, and in response to a series of government evictions, seized the parliament building and took the Prime Minister and some other people hostage. The siege was eventually lifted after the government

agreed to pardon the men. Immediately after the hostages were released, and in front of the world's press, the 'pardoned' men were arrested and quickly put into the 'condemned cells', without trial. Facing at least five years in jail, the men were able, however, to appeal to the Privy Council in London, which obtained their release. The government even had to pay compensation.

Lord Ackner, delivering the judgement of the Privy Council, said: 'In seasons of insurrection there are often critical moments when a well-timed offer of pardon to the insurgents may restore the tranquillity of the Commonwealth... if suffered to pass unimproved, it may afterwards be impossible to recall.' It is indeed surprising that a group of elderly white men thousands of miles away from Jamaica can obtain the release from prison of these coup plotters.

Lord Griffiths, speaking in a BBC interview, summed up one of the greatest objections to the existence of the Privy Council. 'For these cases... you need a very sensitive perception of that society's needs, and I am not sure that it is easy for us to have sensitive perceptions of society's needs in some country of whose social customs we are totally ignorant.'

But while it may seem an outlandish idea to have British judges considering cases in Jamaica, there are in fact similar

Phensidyl addiction

Sir, Reportedly, addiction to 'Phensidyl' cough syrup has increased in an alarming way. Most of the addicts are students of colleges and universities. Students of high schools are also becoming addicted to Phensidyl. Phensidyl cough syrup was banned by the government a few years ago. But that did not stop coming of Phensidyl bottles from India.

The bus terminals of Dhaka are said to be the main centres of buying Phensidyl.

Some businessmen may be making a huge profit by selling this harmful syrup. But Phensidyl, taken as a drug, can prove fatal for a person's health. An addict takes a bottle of this syrup in one or two gulps. The feeling afterwards is sensational but gradually it destroys a person's immune system, destroys his/her capability to think positively, deteriorates health, and brain and the worst of all is that the addiction to Phensidyl transforms a lively, healthy, jubilant person into a living zombie.

Thousands of young boys with a lot of potentialities have become hostage in the hands of this sweet venom. Once a person becomes addicted to this, it becomes very hard to divert him from the sensation it presents. Heroin, marijuana, hashish are dangerous drugs. Many organisations have held seminars to make the people aware of the danger of being addicted to these drugs, but no seminars were held to inform the people of the threat Phensidyl poses towards a developing nation.

Programmes relating to the hazards of Phensidyl addiction should be shown on TV. Social organisations should take prompt steps to spread information regarding the bane of Phensidyl addiction. The law enforcing agencies should come forward to punish those in-

voled in selling this harmful drug. Otherwise the future of many of our youths is bleak.

By taking concrete measures and informing the people of the adverse effects of Phensidyl addiction, we can save our young generation and also help them to grow up to be a force directed to the development of the country.

Touheed Feroze
New DOHS, Dhaka

Foreign scholarships

Sir, We have got cultural and educational agreements with many of our friendly foreign countries. This includes student exchange programme. Many countries offer scholarship to provide educational facilities to our prospective students in different disciplines at their universities and colleges.

But we don't always see advertisement of foreign scholarships in the national dailies. Sometimes the advertisements are released one or two days before the last date of submission of application. As a result, the students who are studying outside Dhaka cannot seize the opportunity. Even the students studying in Dhaka cannot apply for foreign scholarship within such a short period. It is often alleged some interested persons manage to send their sons/daughters and relations abroad by keeping such information secret to them. We know many of the universities and colleges of European, American and affluent Asian countries have their scholarship programme for the students of less developed countries like Bangladesh. But it is also alleged that due to our wrong handling many of the scholarship facilities are being lapsed. It is true that many of the parents here are ready to

bear travel expenses if the chances of scholarship are offered to their sons and daughters.

I would request the concerned ministry to publish a list of scholarships available in different colleges/universities of different countries well ahead of time. The authorities should also publish the required formalities to be completed for submission of application. A developing country like Bangladesh needs many scholars. Many of our prospective students, when trained outside, may turn into such scholars as can give something new to the country. The human resources development programme will not be fully successful if our brilliant boys are not sent abroad to get acquainted with latest technologies.

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury
Sonali Bank, Dhaka

New Delhi and river water

Sir, The land, water, air and sun are not man-made. They belong to nature and to all mankind — to enjoy and to consume carefully and prudently, for their very existence.

During the last ten thousand years man has travelled from pre-historic days to present day civilisation and so the universal declaration of human rights has been made on this good earth on December 10, 1948.

But it appears that New Delhi does not care for anybody or any matter and continues to indulge in activities prejudicial to the interest of human beings.

Violating international laws and in defiance of socio-economic and moral values New Delhi has unilaterally stopped the flow of water of the twenty thousand years old Ganges river to Bangladesh in 1974.

New Delhi, however, has also committed the same crime in its own state of Tamil Nadu by misguiding or compelling Karnataka state to cut off water supply to neighbouring Tamil Nadu, maybe on account of North India's abhorrence of South India.

Being shocked and depressed and sitting lonely on the Marina sea shore in the state capital Madras the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayaram Jayalalitha started a hunger strike protesting the martinet policy of New Delhi leaders.

We would request the belligerent New Delhi rulers not to play with the lives of millions of people and not to use river water as a tool to suppress and dictate people.

O H Kabir
Dhaka-1203

Purana Paltan Pool garbage box

Sir, Purana Paltan Pool, near Jamat Khana, has a luxuriant stock of garbage now polluting and affecting the health of the residents of the area specially, and the road users in general.

A garbage box is meant for keeping or creating a healthy atmosphere in a neighbourhood. Unluckily, this Purana Paltan Pool garbage box is causing harm by deteriorating the atmosphere of the locality awfully polluting the road and spreading stinking smell all day and night.

The authorities concerned are requested to kindly take necessary action immediately for removing the garbage box from the Pool, for the sake of health and comfort of the inhabitants of Paltan residential area.

A resident and an investor, CEPZ

Justice M Ibrahim : A Tribute

by Tarikul Alam

ME N of courage, conviction, commitment and capability are on the wane in our society. Ideas are throttled, traditions tarnished, time-serving trivialities tend to be our guiding principles — 'alas a 1st generation' to quote cartoonist Low.

In this context, I pay my profound respect to late Justice M Ibrahim, vanguard of democratic ideals, emblem of justice and life-long crusader of truth and just and right cause of the people.

I met him in early fifties, when I was a university student and also editor of the 'East Bengal Scout', official organ of the East Bengal Boy Scouts Association. Justice M Ibrahim was the honorary Provincial Scout Commissioner. He was a Judge of Dhaka High Court. I went to get a message for the magazine. He was much impressed to see me working and studying at the same time. I also met his daughter Sufia Ibrahim (Prof. Sufia Ahmed of Dhaka University now).

I had many more occasions to meet him thereafter as a journalist in the erstwhile daily Millat and the daily Azad. From 1951 to 1959 I saw him as a High Court judge, Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka University and Law Minister in the Ayub cabinet, the last he resigned in protest of Ayub's anti-people and undemocratic constitution. I also watched his active but off-the-screen bold role as a strong fighter against the then government atrocities. During

my very fruitful relationship with him I came to know of his eventful life and versatility. He was deeply interested in the cultural, traditional, literary and many folded richness of them emerging Bengali nationhood. His main emphasis was on this last aspect which turned him to be the guiding inspiration to the old and young alike.

In his private life too justice Ibrahim was a literary tormentor. In this arena he had Prof. A Q M Zulfiqar Ali, Golam Mawia, a judge, and Mizanur Rahman, a senior civil servant, as his compatriots. He formed a close literary circle 'Ekhnaw' through which all the participants used to exchange views on contemporary social, cultural, literary, religious and political topics by letters. I have seen some of these writings and indeed they were of high literary and intellectual flavour. This was a domain of their own and a compilation of these writings would be of immense value for all types of readers. Justice Ibrahim's daughter, son and his illustrious son-in-law can very well embark on this project.

My memories, are full of his many and varied activities. But my present ill-health does not permit me to dwell on all. May be in near future I shall be able to fulfill my desire. Till then I conclude by paying my sincere and deep gratitude and respect to this great son of Bengal. Justice M Ibrahim is no more with us... but his ever bright memories are.