

Dhaka, Friday, October 22, 1993

Let Us Talk about it

On Wednesday, passed the first of the 72-day staggered and graduated programme of the professional and 26 other cadres of the national administration. The programme has been launched to realise a 17-point 'recommendations' geared to achieve an 'accountable and democratic' administration. The campaigners form an overwhelming majority of all who constitute the administration of the government.

Without going into the merit of the 17 points and the wisdom of the current campaign it can be said that the government, in this big tussle between the generalist and the specialist cadres of government officers, stands dangerously exposed to proving the professionals' point that it is more the generalist 'administration' cadre — the so-called bureaucrats — than the people's power manifested through representative elected offices which *de facto* runs the government without being accountable to anyone. The Press Note published on Tuesday was an unfortunate piece of warning betraying the sad lack of wariness of the government on this point.

And there is no taking issue with Dr Majed, the leader of the campaigners, when he spurns the Press Note on the point that it amounted to falsifying the records that the government was months back made well abreast of the campaign and no less a person than the Prime Minister herself had pledged to accept the first four of the 17 points as early as on April 15.

The present campaign has undoubtedly opened up possibilities of a thorough examination of our administrative system and the machinery it has sired. It wouldn't be wise to snuff these possibilities out in an exercise of not to give in to the demands of the 'specialists'. It must be admitted that the way the subcontinent has been ruled by bureaucracy for close on a century and a half hasn't ever been ideally suited to the blossoming of democratic ideals and practices.

The times have changed and there are new challenges confronting our nation never even imagined by our forebears in decades gone by. Participatory government is still eluding our people, due in no mean part to the largely unaccountable wielding of state power by an unrepresentative core of the government. The nation is as such stalled from coming of age. This would not at all help in our grappling the present-day challenges — universal health, education and employment, and a crime-free, secure and stable society producing sufficiently for its material and spiritual needs.

Then there is the challenge of fruitfully pressing knowledge — mostly scientific knowledge, the forte of the specialists, — into successfully taking care of those national challenges. The gauntlet thrown by our scientific manpower in the administration is nothing peculiar to Bangladesh. Everywhere the specialists are exerting to have a say in the making of the decisions about how and where to apply their specialisation — 'no more ready to be ordered about by people who do not have a wink of idea about things they are deciding.

We do not see any harm in attempting to benefit from the openings made by the campaign in the matter of finding an administrative system more suited to the needs of our people at the present time. Let the 17 points be the first basis of a very meaningful debate — and not of a confrontation — leading to striking such a system. Let the government then talk to itself and not give way to impatience and unreason.

Georgia Convulses

The raging battle between Georgian government forces and the rebel Abkhazians appears to be most gripping among conflicts in the former Soviet republics. In no other republic did the government face a stronger foe than ousted president Zviad Gamsakhurdia. In a state of convulsion, Georgia has been forced to waste most of its strength on this terrible civil war at a time of transition to a stabilisation from the chaos it discovered itself in immediately after severing its connection with the Soviet Union. Georgia like many other republics now finds how difficult it is to fend for itself.

With Gamsakhurdia taking one after another town and advancing inexorably until yesterday when he was forced to retreat leaving Kutaisi, the Georgian government is in no position to address the economic and social problems a new nation everywhere is bound to inherit. According to the Cable News Network (CNN) reports, government forces have retaken some of the towns earlier captured by the Abkhazian forces. But the fear is that the repulsion of the rebel forces can be a short-lived victory for the government forces reportedly locked in internal rifts over the issue of command.

Certainly, driving out the rebels from Kutaisi is a miracle the demoralised and feuding government army has made possible. If the government forces' success includes the recapture of Poti, also reported by the CNN, Eduard Shevardnadze — who has frantically looking for help from other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), including Russia — can indeed get some breathing time, if not a permanent relief. Response to his appeal so far has been less than encouraging and it is because of this that the latest success against the rebels is sweeter to him. His humiliating retreat from Sukhumi — where he arrived to personally defend the town — was a serious setback and the establishment of control by Gamsakhurdia over the entire west Georgia and the route to the Black Sea amounted to Georgia's being an impossible proposition as a sovereign entity.

If that threat has somehow lessened, there is however no reason for the Georgian government to relax or rejoice. If Shevardnadze cannot convince Russia of his desperation, the rebels, with help from renegade Russian soldiers and mercenaries, will carry on an offensive he will be pitifully ill-equipped to resist and repulse. Apart from addressing the Georgian crisis on the battle field, there is perhaps a need for settling it through negotiations. War after all leaves the country in ruins which none can govern.

Politics at JU Mars Teacher-Student Relations

THE existing stalemate at the Jahangirnagar University is unlikely to be resolved by the time classes start on November 7 with a proposed embargo on students' politics.

The university syndicate is expected to clamp a 'temporary' ban on student politics at its October 26 session in view of the code-of-conduct prepared by a seven-member body headed by the Dean of the Science Faculty Prof Amir Hossain Khan.

The proposed code-of-conduct also earmarked specific rules for stay in the halls, closure of the women's dormitories by dusk and right of authorities to conduct search in the residential halls.

"Students are surely to react sharply to this code-of-conduct," one student said, adding, "a university is not a kindergarten." The students were forced to vacate the halls on July 29 following armed vandalism carried out by a group of 'unruly' students. At least ten teachers were hurt when a militant procession under the banner of 'General Students Council' attacked the teachers when they were in the middle of an election.

The processionists were demanding withdrawal of the expulsion order on the joint general secretary of the JU unit of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal — Hafizur Rahman Hafiz.

The then Vice Chancellor of the University, Prof Kazi Saleh Ahmed, resigned immediately after the attack on his colleagues blaming the Jahangirnagar University Central Students' Union (JUCSU) and JCD leaders for the terrorist act.

In an hastily called meeting, the syndicate closed the institution sine die while the teachers, officials and employees of the university went on spontaneous strike protesting the event.

Registrar of the university, Mohammad Ali, levelled charges against 21 students, all belonging to JCD, including six mem-

bers of the JUCSU body, under the non-bailable Anti-Terrorism Act with Savar Police.

As expected, both the teachers and the students indulged in mutual recrimination following the violence. The JCD leaders said that the attack was an outburst of the 'long harboured grudge' against teachers. The teachers, on their part, said that the government-backed terrorists were violating the congenial atmosphere of the University.

"The JCD was strengthened by the protection they earlier

one JCD leader said. Earlier, in November, two of the JCD men were expelled from the university for their alleged misdeed with the hall provost, Dr Golam Hossain. And JCD had to fight for six months — opening fire, ransacking classrooms, tearing test scripts to postpone examinations, detaining transport, and laying a 16-hour siege on the syndicate meeting — until the "guardian angel" minister arrived.

Barrister Nazmul Huda, the Information Minister went to

JU teachers, in solidarity with the Federation of Bangladesh University Teachers' Association (FBUTA), carried out their agitation programmes on various occasions and abruptly decided in favour of resumption of duties.

Incidentally, the decision of resumption came following the Prime Minister's strong statement against teachers strike, on October 12. "Long strike could have had adverse effect," one teacher, on condition of anonymity, said. The JUTA statement however said, "The situation has improved with some of the positive steps taken by the government. For the greater interest of the general students, we are temporarily postponing our strike."

After three months of unscheduled closure classes are expected to recommence on November 7, though the teachers joined their duties on October 17. The code-of-conduct is only an attempt to divert attention," one student leader said.

The Jahangirnagar University — which enjoyed a good reputation for its regular academic schedule — is presently lagging far behind in scheduled course programme. The three months closure has already precipitated a session jam of one year.

Admission seekers in the first year honours classes of the 1992-93 academic year are yet to complete their admission. But, the main victim of the session jam are the masters degree examinees who were just one or two papers away from completion of their examination.

"By assaulting us, the students have hurt our pride," said the JUTA president Prof Khandaker Mustahidur Rahman adding, "how will we face the students after such a humiliation?" The whole affair has greatly damaged the usually cordial teacher-student relations. How far the code-of-conduct is going to improve the situation is anybody's guess.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

enjoyed from their 'guardian angels' in the government," one teacher remarked, adding, "and now they have overstepped their limit."

Attack on a teacher is in no way tolerable — true — but the question arises why do the students pick the polling day for the attack? Why do the students resort to violence, something that had already been proved to be ineffective in their earlier use? Why did some of the teachers, forgetting their status, try to face the aggressive students which in a way aggravated the situation.

The JCD was demanding re-admission of Hafiz to the University, who has been expelled for one year by the syndicate. This was done after a year of probing by the Disciplinary Board, for snatching away a tender bid in August last year.

Referring to the procrastination of the syndicate, the JCD alleged that the punitive measure was 'motivated.' The syndicate is taking revenge on us just because it could not punish two of our colleagues earlier,"

the JU campus on May 19 to end the hunger strike and pressurize the then VC to retract the expulsion orders.

The Jahangirnagar University Teachers' Association (JUTA) protested against the minister's intervention, terming it as a threat to the university's autonomy as provided for in the 1973 University Ordinance.

In July's incident, the government, however, accepted the resignation letter of Prof Saleh Ahmed and appointed the treasurer of the institution as the Acting VC. The repeated demand for arrest of the accused 21 students by JUTA was, however, overlooked by the government. Furthermore, one of the main accused student, the Vice President of the JUCSU body — dissolved on September 14 by the acting VC — Masud Hashan Talukder, reportedly attended a public meeting at Savar near the JU campus.

Masud also lodged a case with the Savar Police against ten teachers on August 13 charging them for the violence. Police, however, exempted the teachers from the charges. The

WFP Anniversary

Civil Strife Now Major Cause of World Hunger

by Francis Mwanza and Sue Cullinan

WAR and civil unrest have become the prime causes of suffering and starvation for millions of people worldwide, according to World Food Programme (WFP) figures.

During the five-year period from 1989-93, a record average of 85 per cent of relief food delivered by WFP — the food aid organization of the United Nations — was for victims of civil strife rather than of natural disasters.

"This is a horrifying indictment of man's inhumanity," says WFP Executive Director Catherine Bertini. "Not only has political, religious or ethnic conflict left hundreds of thousands dead or maimed, and millions uprooted, but conflict is severely hampering efforts to deliver humanitarian relief. This is the case of Angola, the Sudan and former Yugoslavia."

Today, more than 24 million people affected by civil strife depend on emergency food assistance provided by WFP. In 1993, this amounted to 2.25 million metric tons of food, costing US\$ 1.1 billion.

Founded in 1963 as a small experimental programme with a budget of US\$ 100 million, WFP has become the largest multi-lateral food aid organization in the world, with an annual expenditure of US\$1.5 billion. Over the past 30 years, WFP has invested approximately US\$13 billion in assistance to more than 1,600 development projects and provided relief food in more than 1,200 emergency and long-term refugee operations.

As the Rome-based organization celebrates its 30th anniversary in 1993, its services have never been more in demand. Among those currently receiving emergency relief assistance are refugees and displaced people

in Angola, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Liberia, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire, Mozambique, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Tajikistan and the former Yugoslavia.

Emergency Food Aid

In 1982, 48 countries required emergency food aid to meet acute food shortages — caused predominantly by civil strife. In Africa, such conflicts often coincided with natural disasters to produce large scale complex emergencies. In the Horn of Africa alone, 15.7 million people required emergency food aid, as civil war combined with drought to ravage Somalia and Sudan.

The logistical problems of providing aid to people in conflict situations are enormous. WFP has built bridges, improved roads and airstrips, provided port warehousing and rail equipment, and air-dropped commodities to reach people in otherwise inaccessible areas.

Where warring factions may use food as a weapon, WFP has helped negotiate 'corridors of tranquillity', for example in Sudan, Rwanda, El Salvador, Afghanistan and Eritrea, so that food aid can be delivered to civilians in need on both sides. The difficulties of delivering food aid in countries with no government infrastructure were tragically exemplified in Somalia in 1992, and similar situations, notably in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Angola, continue to hamper relief efforts today.

Development

At the end of 1992, WFP was assisting 258 ongoing development projects with total a commitment valued at US\$ 3 billion. These projects were designed to assist developing countries improve their econo-

mies and social programmes.

WFP is the largest source of assistance within the United Nations system to projects involving and benefiting poor women in developing countries. Well over half of WFP development assistance directly supports women's advancement, measured in terms of their increased access to employment, income, markets, education, training, and health and sanitary services.

The Programme is also the largest provider of grant assistance for environmental activities in developing countries. Since its establishment, the Programme has provided more than US\$ 5 billion to projects aimed at increasing the long-term ability of the land to provide people with a basic means of existence.

Major Changes

Although the mandate of WFP has remained essentially the same over 30 years — to provide relief and promote development — several major changes are evident. With the maturing of the Programme, and increased resources, new types of projects, and larger projects, are now funded.

The most visible shift is the high priority recently given to sub-Saharan African countries because of the serious and multiple problems of the region. At WFP's inception, its food aid was almost exclusively concentrated in Asia. Now more than 60 per cent of WFP assistance goes to sub-Saharan Africa, representing half of all UN grant expenditure on the continent.

Another recent change has been the dramatic increase in WFP's relief activities, which now take up 70 per cent of the programme's total resources,

compared with only nine per cent 20 years ago.

In January 1992, a new working arrangement between UNHCR and WFP resulted in WFP assuming responsibility for the mobilization and delivery of all basic food commodities to UNHCR-managed refugee feeding operations. This amounts to 80 per cent of refugee food requirements worldwide, and partly explains the substantial increase of WFP resources directed to emergencies. Assistance to the former Yugoslavia is the most recent example of relief operations under this new arrangement.

Food Aid Graduates

The trend during the past 30 years has been an increase in the number of countries requiring either relief or development food aid or both, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

The good news is that a number of countries that have been past recipients of WFP development food aid — Cyprus, Gabon, Greece, Hungary, Malta, Portugal, Singapore, Republic of Korea and Venezuela — have "graduated" from food aid and no longer need it.

The basic objective of food aid is to help low-income, food-deficit countries become more self-reliant. Yet it is commonly seen in terms of direct feeding — free handouts to the poor. The work of WFP over the years has shown that food can be a valuable development resource in overcoming the causes, and not only the symptoms, of poverty.

"When WFP was created, it was not created for emergencies," says WFP Development Division Director, Amos Ngongl. "The emergencies have more or less forced our hand, in that

IN MEMORIAM

My Ali Bhai

— Shaheen Anam

HE just flew away into the skies and never returned. With just an affectionate hug, and a whisper "Shaheen, don't cry, just pray for me", Ali Bhai said goodbye on the evening of 7 October. I had no way of knowing that this was the final goodbye. That was the last I saw of him, that giant of a man, the doyen of journalism in Bangladesh, but for me just plain and simple, Ali Bhai.

What do I think of most when I remember him? Yes, his smile, winning, affectionate and loving. His simple and uncomplicated nature was reflected on his face which had a sublime kindness, almost a childlike innocence. Friends who knew him in his younger days say he was an exceptionally handsome and dynamic person. I first met him in Paris, in 1979, when he came to Unesco as the Executive Director of the Manila based Press Foundation of Asia. Having heard so much about him I was in a way awed by his presence. He looked elegant and spoke so eloquently that I came back totally impressed. This was the beginning of a loving, affectionate relationship between me, the wife of a very young friend, and one of the most famous journalists in South East Asia.

Over the years, especially



during our stay in Bangkok when he used to visit us often, my relationship with Ali Bhai changed from just an elder brother — younger sister to that of two matured individuals with mutual respect for each other as professionals. I was working for the UNHCR at that time. But what I enjoyed most was the feeling of just being able to be a little girl, looking up towards a revered elder brother. I always thought it was an honour and privilege that he often introduced me as his "chhoto boan," younger sister. Slowly I discovered the man that was Ali Bhai. I found inside that very professional, internationally acclaimed journalist a heart and a mind which was constantly thinking of doing something for his beloved country, Bangladesh.

I remember with what nervousness I would give him to read something I had written. How I would hold my breath while he commented on my writing. Even his criticism would have an affectionate tone. He was never disparaging, but always encouraging and inspiring. He felt keenly that more and more women should come into the field of journalism. "Remember, to keep your paragraphs short, Shaheen" he would gently say sometimes or "be careful about your punctuations". Much as he loved me, he would never accept my writing if it did not meet his standards. He would also not reject it outright, just give advice to improve it.

Ali Bhai loved good food which, for him, was our Bengali food. His eating habits were simple and very much Bengali in spite of the fact that he had lived abroad for so long. "Shaheen, our own food, and not the imported moghali delicacies, is the best in the world and the most nutritious," he would say. It was so easy to make him happy, just some Dal, Bhat and Vegetable would be enough to bring that loving smile on his face. I loved cooking for him as he would just overwhelm me with praises which were always so sincere and genuine. My deep regret is that I could not spend more time with him, or treat him to more of my cooking.

For the last one year his failing health was cause for much concern among his friends. He seldom liked to talk about it and would brush aside any suggestion of a serious check-up. Because of serious arthritis his step would sometimes falter but he never liked taking anybody's help while walking. It seemed as if his body could not keep up with his mind which was agile and alert till the last day that I saw him. His deep sense of social responsibility overcame his physical disability and motivated him to write till the very end. Just before going to Bangkok he remembered that he had been invited to speak at a seminar for drug addiction. He requested his executive editor to attend on his behalf and promptly started giving him points that should be raised. He said our young generation do not see any direction in their lives. Lack of job opportunities leading to frustration is perhaps the cause of rising drug addiction among our youths, he lamented.

I cry as I write. I cry because all of this for me is just memories now. The shock of his death borders on disbelief and even anger. How could he leave for ever without even saying goodbye. I did pray for him as he had asked me to, but perhaps God in his infinite wisdom thought Ali Bhai would be better off there than here. I will always remember my Ali Bhai with deep love, gratitude and profound respect. I will miss him. For me he symbolized a special generation of people, people who were committed to everything that is sincere, honest and true.

Of Jamdani and Nakshi Kantha

Sir, Some time ago there was a lengthy article in your paper about the fantastic new development of the Jamdani sari — to heavy cotton yardage, linen etc, using a totally new technique and loom claimed as her own effort by Ms Nasreen Akhtar.

Cotton Jamdani fabric for curtaining etc was first developed in the sixties; it was used as cushions etc in the eighties. The technique, the loom and the designs are the result of the skill and creativity of the Jamdani weavers and have been so for centuries. Ms Akhtar's business is in Jamdani table linen, chair-covers etc and she is welcome to take credit for that. But her contention that she has created all of it single-handed is really preposterous.

On Sept 17, your paper had enabled Ms Nasreen Akhtar to make yet more of her claims in "Dhaka Day by Day". This time about Nakshi Kanthas. The Kantha stitch is not "an ordinary running stitch". Its rippling

effect is what makes an exquisite Kantha. Otherwise it would be a piece of embroidery like dozens of others and not a Nakshi Kantha at all. Organisations like Kumudini and Aarong, for instance, have invested years reviving, developing and marketing this traditional skill which had all but died out under the pressures of modern day life. Today thousands of women across the country — and not just in workshops in Dhanmondi — are making substantial financial contributions to their families' well being thanks to the effort of such organisations. It is not something which has come about in the last couple of years since Ms Nasreen Akhtar went into business.

Farzana Khair, Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Science and Technology

Sir, The article by the Secretary of the new Ministry of Science and Technology in the Star Computer Supplement of Sept 15 made encouraging

reading. A lot of foundation work has to be started and completed at a fast pace to set the Ministry working at high speed, to make up for the lost years.

Before the basic institutions are set up, considerable documentation, rules and regulations have to be drafted and got approved, so that the activities in the S&T sector are visible to the general public. It is only to be hoped that the take-off period could be shortened, with the help of dedicated technical staff, both inside and outside the Ministry.

To obtain feedbacks, an early National Conference might be a suitable mechanism for exchange of views and drawing up of the general broad-based recommendations, for the consideration of the high-level committees, and, subsequently the Cabinet.

To cut down time in the bureaucratic processing, the right persons must man the right places. This should not be a problem as the country has adequate S&T personnel who can change the gears after passing

through the reorientation environment.

It is hoped the Cabinet will accord S&T top-most priority and the Prime Minister will push the administration to produce good team work in all the sectors.

A Mawaz, Dhaka

We mustn't miss the Palestine train

Sir, The Palestinians and the Israelis signed peace accord in Washington on 13th September, drawing an end to their (Palestinian) virtual nomad life. The Palestinian people are returning to their homeland after so many years. Their roads, buildings, educational institutions, hospitals, industries, trade and commerce have to be build anew now. The reconstruction work is essential and imminent. As a whole, that land is to be re-organised, recast and renovated in the line of a sovereign estate. Japan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, America, the European Community countries have assured economic co-op-

eration in the reconstruction works of shattered Palestine.

During the crisis period of Kuwait, Bangladesh came forward in the former's aid in possible manner. But when the opportunity of participating in reconstructing Kuwait came, it went to the hands of so-called other friends of Kuwait.

This time is the case of Palestine. Besides extending normal support Bangladesh has presented a valuable piece of land (at Gulshan) to the PLO, long back it became an autonomous estate, out of gesture of love and spirit of fraternity to the Palestinian brethren. On the other hand, the Bangladesh freedom fighters fought in that desert land for establishing a free estate of Palestine.

The Prohashi-O-Pottaygato Bangladeshi Kolyan Shango (PPBS — the Bangladeshi expatriates' and returnees' welfare association) expects this time Bangladesh will move in advance to avail the first train of all-round reconstruction works needed in Palestine.

Especially those Bangladeshi expatriates who were compelled to return home empty handed

from Iraq and Kuwait in a bid to save their lives during the Gulf war and are now at the verge of starvation, should be given first priority to be engaged in development activities in Palestine. In this respect the Shango (the association) thinks — the Manpower Ministry, Chamber of Commerce & Industries, manpower traders, industrialists, individual business magnets should have been active by this time to make up the previous deficits incurred by Bangladesh in Kuwait's reconstruction works.

During 1979 to 1990 two Bangladeshi firms employing 12 thousand Bangladeshis in construction works in Iraq, fetched one hundred crore Taka to Bangladesh. Such firms and also others are advised by this Shango to please make positive participation in reconstruction works of Palestine. At the same time, the Government is also requested to kindly make sure, any redtaps and frauds in these activities, if formed, be dealt with severely.

S A Hussain, Secretary General, PPBS.