

Exchange Rate Management

In a setting of currency convertibility on current account, it would seem a bit incongruous that a visiting World Bank Vice President should suggest to our Finance Minister that the Taka ought to be devalued. Convertibility as commonly understood, would imply that market forces determine the exchange rate. Perhaps the World Bank does not read convertibility in the current foreign exchange regime of currency conversion rates being fixed under the guiding hand of the central bank.

Be that as it may, Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman is reported to have brushed aside the suggestion, adding that if any thing is to be done at all, Taka should be revalued, rather than devalued. The Minister is reported to have pointed out to the World Bank Vice President that the export earnings of the country had been rising, remittances from Bangladesh nationals working abroad increasing and the foreign exchange reserves were at a very comfortable level of over 2.4 billion US dollars. He is also said to have asserted that the Taka did not lose any ground to the intervention currency, namely the US dollar, even after it was made convertible on current account.

Whatever might have been the reaction of the World Bank Vice President, one can easily locate a flaw in the Finance Minister's assertion about the Taka holding its ground against the US dollar. After all, Taka has not been put on a free float. It's anybody's guess which way rates will move if the central bank lifts its guiding hand and the remaining controls on current account transactions are removed.

The Finance Minister is on target on other counts. Yet, should the movement of exports or, for that matter, level of remittances from abroad, be considered against a static background? By all accounts, export of jute manufactures continues to lose ground against increased competition from India whose currency is on a free float. Admittedly, the low level of productivity of the jute industry here — said to be less than half of that of India — is primarily responsible for the debacle. However, productivity cannot be talked up overnight. In pursuance of the commitments made to the donor community, the government cannot also subsidise exports. What other remedy is available now, than to follow an active exchange rate policy to regain export competitiveness in the short term? Had the Taka been put on a free float, as India has done, the government at least would have been spared the pain of carrying out exchange rate adjustments. An active exchange rate would help other export items too. Even the star export performer, ready-made garment, is not free of all problems. As for remittances, suffice it to say that in FY '93, number of job holders abroad rose by 28% but fund inflow was only 14% up.

At the same time, there are also reasons for the government to look at the issue differently. Primarily, it's a question of balancing importers' interests with those of the exporters. Currency depreciation would increase cost of imports. Among other things, this would raise the cost of investment in plant and machinery for setting up new industry. Import cost rise-induced price increase could even jeopardise the much vaunted macro-economic stability by rekindling inflation. Besides, export is not an unmixed blessing in so far inflation perspective is concerned. Export receipts when converted into local currency, would increase domestic money supply which, in its turn, could bring in inflationary pressure unless imports also rise parallelly.

Barring agriculture, export had virtually been the only bright spot in an otherwise underperforming economy over the last couple of years. Government has also adopted export-led growth as a policy platform. Despite declaring the Taka convertible on current account, the government has, for all practical purposes, retained the prerogative of determining the exchange rate. Now it has to make a choice on exchange rate management policy. While exercising its option, it would do well to bear in mind that once impaired, it is hard to regain external competitiveness and lost markets.

In Jail without Trial

Falu Miah's release from jail, where he spent long 21 years — 16 of those without trial, is unusual. People like him with none to move for them can hardly expect to have a review of their cases once so condemned behind the bar. Admittedly, Falu Miah has more than a fair share of their miseries in life and know no other way other than cursing their own fate. But mere blaming the stroke of bad luck would not explain the whole story.

The point here is that an individual's confinement without trial makes a mockery of the legal system. The personal trauma and loss suffered by the person concerned cannot be recompensed by anything in the world. If the laws of the land are meant to deal with crimes, they are equally devoted to protect an individual's rights and freedom. If the judiciary — no matter for whatever reasons — fails to develop a system where none suffers wrongly, it certainly invites criticism, lacks credibility and even respectability.

The incidents of imprisonment without trial may be rare, but not totally absent. There was yet another case this year involving an innocent man who had to spend nine years in prison without trial. Now the question is: when one such case is detected cannot the authorities concerned give a close look into the criminal records and other related papers of the inmates of different jails? We are fully aware that a huge backlog stands in the way of a speedy disposal of cases in the court. But this should not necessarily be a plea for leaving unchecked whether men and women are serving their terms without conviction or beyond terms or are confined without trial.

Someone somewhere might have the onus to do the job, and in time, so that none gets punishment undeserved. In this case Falu Miah was sent to the Dhaka Central Jail in 1972 and only in 1978 did a special martial law court condemn him for rigorous imprisonment for a term that ended on October 27, 1986. Since then the man in his late 50s was in prison without trial. Now suffering from asthma and mental disorder and also losing all connections with his near and dear ones, this old and infirm man has posed — without protesting — through his suffering a question none can answer to. Even the way he was sent to jail in the first instance has been questioned. It is not just a case of justice delayed, justice denied, it is something more. A hostile and inefficient system is what leaves at least some people's lives in tatters. This must change for the dispensation of justice.

Let Us Talk about Seventeen-Point Charter of PROKRACHI-BCS

GOOD GOVERNANCE

by Mohammed Abu Hena

The author, Secretary-General, PROKRACHI-BCS Action Committee, invites us to discuss the 17-points charter of his organisation, which essentially calls for a radical and fundamental transformation of the way our administration and the government itself, works. We invite our readers to send in their views, especially BCS (Admin) Association and others who are opposed to it, so that through airing of views from both sides we create an informed public opinion on this vital and controversial subject. This is the first of a three part series.

THE 17 Point Charter of PROKRACHI-BCS is a product of a series of seminars, symposia and discussion meetings on "Good Governance" organized by the professionals during the last two years. The Charter was formally submitted to the Hon'ble Prime Minister on 12 Feb, 1993 in the form of a memorandum. Since then several rounds of discussions were held between the PROKRACHI-BCS Action Council and senior Ministers of the Government duly authorized by the Prime Minister in this behalf. During the discussions both sides reached an understanding that some of the points needed further examination by a high powered cabinet committee, some were to be moved through the Parliament and the cabinet and some could be implemented forthwith in the form of Government orders. The Prime Minister was apprised of this position during the meeting held on 15 April, 1993, when she gave her consent to the prompt implementation of some of the points and ordered formation of a high powered cabinet committee headed by the LGRD Minister to examine and submit recommendations on the remaining other proposals.

Since then neither the Cabinet Committee has been formally formed and announced nor any government order has been issued giving effect to the agreed four points. To make it worse a barrage of bureaucratic misgivings and misinterpretations aimed at maligning the 17 Points have surfaced in various forms calling to question the very basis of the Charter—a blue print of accountable and democratic government. According to the bureaucrats, the traditional system of administration now in existence, is sufficient to ensure democracy and accountability and the changes proposed by the PROKRACHI-BCS are focused on self-interest.

In the bureaucratic analyses the Charter has not been judged by its contents, consistency and clarity. Rather the analysis is an unconscious rationalization, of their own interests and bias.

Bangladesh and after:
The people of Bangladesh fought a bloody war to liberate themselves from the clutches of the Pakistan's economic exploitation and also of the Punjabi dominated CSP Association.

A constitution was proclaimed ensuring fundamental rights of the people, separation of judiciary from executive, and rule by people's representatives at each tier of administration. The executive organ of the government was now assumed to represent the collective will of the people and to be acting for the common good. The whole nation was to be transformed into an economic force, an industrial producer of overwhelming importance. It was a new challenge demanding new response. And the First Five Year Plan declared: "They (the administrators) can, therefore, be neither innovators or catalytic agents for a social change... It is only a political cadre with firm roots in the people and willing to live among the people as one of them that can mobilize the masses and transform their pattern of behavior". The districts were placed under governors who would hopefully be elected people's representatives in course of time and the Deputy Commissioner was taken back to the lower court as district magistrate. The transition period between two gov-

ernments in 1975 gave them the chance to stage a comeback and the same year they came out with the new Rules of Business which proclaimed the Secretaries as heads of Ministries and Divisions and Principal Accounting Officer. The PROKRACHI started their movement at this stage. But the new government was cautious in its reactions to this CSP take over. It adopted a different technique to seek a devolution of its power and authority. It planned to abolish service as it stood then and create a new unified civil service based on functional concept and logical rules and principles. In the process the single claim of the lower court magistrates and collectors (of land revenues) on the country's civil service was rejected.

The erstwhile Civil Service of Pakistan and its offshoots were disbanded and demolished and a unified Bangladesh Civil Service was created comprising 28 functional cadres in which the magistrates and collectors and the common executive officers were grouped together to form one cadre called the BCS (Administrative) cadre. All functional cadres including the BCS (Admin) were declared equal with same entry point, equivalence of pay, status and prospects of promotion.

All secretarial posts (Deputy Secretary and above) were declared pool posts to be filled by the Public Service Commission through open written and oral examination on the basis of prescribed syllabus. While giving effect to the reorganized ser-

vice structure, the government announced that the National Pay Scale and not the secretariat rank would reflect the status of the officers. The colonial-style pressure group of civil servants who monopolized all key positions in the government by acting as allies of the dictatorial regimes, now faced the tough world of competition where they would be nowhere. The ruling political party with its various groups and supporters also asserted their position and relegated the colonial style bureaucracy to a secondary role.

It was at this stage that the PROKRACHI and BCS coordination committee merged on the scene again to fight back and help in creating a democratic system of administration. The government resisted for a while but succumbed eventually to the machinations of the powerful CBA. About one tenth of the erstwhile CSPs joined the regime that followed the fall of Justice Sattar as Advisers and Ministers and another three fourth of them occupied the highest positions in the administration as Heads of Ministries and Divisions and Principal Accounting Officers. Many of them enjoyed the enhanced status of State Minister. The regime gave a freehand to them and they consolidated their strength and position by artificially inflating their cadre strength by about five times and distorting all service rules, regulations and norms. They never allowed open competition in the Senior Service Pool. Instead they took about 80% posts of the Secretariat for the

magistrates and collectors of land revenue, through auto-inclusion and other tactics thereby defeating the pool concept. The inter-cadre equivalence of pay and status established by the reform of 1980 was destroyed. The PROKRACHI and BCS SANGRAM Parishad came out again to protest and faced torture, jail and dismissal from service. A new tier in the secretarial hierarchy was added. The Joint Secretaries in the Secretariat, who were never allowed full time cars were provided with cars. Two elections at national level were held, managed by the BCS (Admin) cadre officers working as DCS and Commissioners. In order to facilitate their promotions, ministries and divisions were multiplied converting some of the thanas and all the sub-divisions into districts with the purpose of speeding promotions. A Deputy Commissioner, of the new district (with the rank and status of Deputy Secretary) stepped into the shoes of a class-II circle officer. In order to grab political power in the other thanas (which failed to become districts) the thana was renamed as upazilla and an upazilla local-government tier was created. No election was allowed to be held for two years in the upazilla parishad and the UNO enjoyed all powers of the elected representatives and their privileges like DCs in the districts. It may be mentioned here that even after the upazilla parishad got abolished, the TNO is acting as the upazilla parishad chairman. What a travesty of elected local gov-

ernment as enshrined in the Constitution!

The mass revolution in which the PROKRACHI was a factor demanded a democratic and accountable people's administration. Through a free and fair election a democratic government was set up. But for a long time, during the existence of the interim government power remained away from it. Meanwhile the old pressure-tactic of the erstwhile CSP Officers, was now evident in the BCS (Admin), and in May, 1991 they wrote a letter addressed to the Cabinet Secretary threatening non-cooperation with the democratically elected government if it continued to transfer their officers against their interest. It was the same old CBA tactic which the CSP Association applied against Firoz Khan Noon government in 1958.

Muzaffer Ahmed Chowdhury (MAC) Commission, guided by the four state principles, recommended a single unified civil service as a means to complete devolution of power from the bureaucracy to the people's representatives at national and sub-national levels. The Pay and Service Commission of 1977-80 also recommended the creation of an all-purpose civil service based professionalism and functional specialization as an alternative to the age-old civil service manned by collectors of land revenue (which is now almost extinct) and magistrates of lower courts. It is interesting to add that in England, the magistrates of the lower courts are appointed by the countries and they are not transferable from one country to another. They do not form part of national civil service of the United Kingdom. Is it not a wonder that in our country, only those who start their career as magistrates in the lower courts claim to be the only civil servants and administrators of the country?

The writer would strongly recommend that the Library Association of Bangladesh launch a vigorous programme of public education, with the help of other professional bodies and the intellectual elite of the country, as a strategy to gain public support for the enactment of the legislation. They should approach the media and the members of the Jatiya Sangsad to play their due role in this respect.

Already, because of the government's education system of 'objective tests with question bank' increasing number of educationalists are beginning to question the efficacy of large investments in textbook provision — since the 'manufacturers' of question bank has taken over the job. In the eyes of establishment, the role of the library seems to have slipped backwards. The public library system is hardly perceived as high priority area and even when grants are given by the government through the ministries of education and culture one needs to record the bungling that goes in the allocation in funds and selection of titles. The high-ups in these ministries need to be more attentive if they want to see the meagre resources utilised for genuine human resource development.

The writer is a publisher, newspaper columnist and an activist of the library movement in the country.

Library — Key to Human Resource Development

by Mohiuddin Ahmed

Books are means of acquiring knowledge and the vehicles of learning of every kind. Libraries are the repositories of all knowledge with the responsibility to distribute, disseminate knowledge to communities and individuals. Holdings in libraries and the number of libraries in a country are indicators of distribution and are also the index of readership in the country.

The basic functions of libraries have more or less remained the same, but the activities designed to fulfil those functions have changed. The library today encourages use of information and documents unlike early libraries that believe in preservation.

The national seminar on "Preparing the Libraries and Librarians of Bangladesh for the 21st Century" (13-15 Nov 1993) has been held at a time when the libraries in the industrialised world are preparing to equip themselves with the product of the modern technologies — the electronic book, and the libraries in the underdeveloped world, such as in Bangladesh, are suffering from multifarious problems of cost, management skills and infrastructure building and are hence incapable of catering to the book-hunger in their societies. In the past few decades, the field of library and information service has witnessed tremendous developing due to development in information technology. We observe that some of the developing countries, including some SAARC countries, have taken steps to develop their library network. But it is dismaying to notice that very little has been done in Bangladesh to build up the infrastructure necessary for library development.

The existing library network in Bangladesh is extremely inadequate to support and sustain any human resource development in the country. Whatever steps have been taken so far by successive governments have been rather unplanned and disorganized. According to international standard, Bangladesh should have at least 55000 libraries in the country. But the total number of libraries have not reached even 2000 so far.

According to our estimate there are 1983 libraries in Bangladesh which includes the National Library, Subjective National Library, Govt Public Library (63), Non-Govt Public Libraries (560) University Libraries (9), Govt College Libraries (173), Non-Govt College Libraries (312) and special libraries which includes institutional libraries (665). Besides, there are 8469 libraries attached to mosques in Bangladesh.

Library Development

1. Enactment of library legislation for the proper development of libraries.
2. Providing tax relief for donations and financial help given by individuals for setting up libraries, purchase of books by libraries, cash fund to libraries etc.
3. Setting up modern security system to protect the property of the libraries.
4. Setting up a library network at the union level and to ensure the participation of the local people at that level.
5. Providing adequate fund-

ing for purchase of books by the libraries.

6. Ensuring the supply of good books to libraries. The present tender system to be abolished.

7. Institute awards for libraries which are running well.

8. Ensuring the growth of permanent and effective readership, to setting library service in the schools and madrasahs of all categories.

9. Increasing the quality of library service in the college and university libraries.

10. In order to develop the professional standard of service, ensuring the appointment of professionals in all technical posts of the library service.

However, the classification of technical and non-technical posts shall be determined by the appointing authority.

11. The libraries of educational institutions shall be essentially manned by professionals. However, where professional librarians are not available in the educational institutions, teachers and other staff may be trained in order to fill in the post temporarily. Ensuring that libraries attached to religious institutions and mosques and places of worship have books on science, general interest, vocation and on current

rent interest besides religious books.

12. Libraries in the country where rare manuscripts are preserved, arrangements may be made for microfilm/microfiche in order that the users have access to these manuscripts. Also to consider the setting up of a central organisation where rare manuscripts and rare books can be collected and preserved.

13. Awarding official patronage to organisations already in operation for promotion of readership and providing coordination to programmes already undertaken for mass literacy, adult literacy and setting up public library.

14. Taking up programmes for setting up library and information centre in the Bangladesh Missions abroad.

The above recommendations in the draft 'Book Policy' remain unheeded because the proposed National Book Policy of the country has yet to come out: first from the cold storage of the government and then it needs to be officially announced. It may be mentioned that the draft policy was finalised almost a year ago by some of the leading intellectuals of the country with the help of professionals and government officials who deliberated for over six weeks on the different aspects of the publishing sector.

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.

Skin whitening creams

Sir, Sunscreen creams are primarily used to protect the skin or are our first line of defence against the harmful effects of ultra violet ray of the sun. They are widely prescribed in the western world, due to the fact that the light skinned people are very much susceptible to sunburn and sun damage, which ultimately give rise to increased incidences of skin cancers, such as Squamous cell carcinoma, Basal cell carcinoma, various types of Melanomas etc. 'White skin' is incidentally inferior type of skin. However, we adore and crave and even die for the fair skin.

Sun creams which are commonly marketed, belong to the chemical sun blocker group — the active ingredients are PABA, benzophenone derivatives, cinnamoylbenzoyl etc. In a developing country like Bangladesh, where people are becoming increasingly beauty and health conscious, there will surely be a big market for skin whitening creams.

It is claimed that they whiten the skin. So, it can be assumed that they contain sun blockers, depigmenting agents. But no information is given so far as the ingredients are concerned.

Media imperialism

When television first went on the air from London in 1936, it was considered a great breakthrough in communication, and reporting gathered a new dimension. Along came educational programmes and different forms of entertainment. In pace with technological advances, greater benefits started being reaped from television's ability to make the world smaller and create an awareness of what is happening around us.

The situation gradually became ripe for exploitation by the most powerful nations, who as self appointed masters entrenched themselves in a position from where they could control the media and unleash a campaign to get the people of this world to like what the masters want them to like, to think as the masters want them to think and to develop a value system according to their dictates.

This campaign goes on in a way to make it too subtle for most of us to appreciate. The result — many of us starting liking many of the ills of the West. Drug taking has become an in-thing. The mayhem and murder, as seen in the Hollywood movies teach us many operational state of the art technology which are filed away in our memories. For many, the knowledge could be helpful. As someone said, Television is the deadliest instrument to create a non-thinking generation of people gun happy".

General Noriega, Saddam Hussein, General Gaddafi have fallen from grace of those patronising them. These same powerful people have painted them through the media, so effectively that most of us cannot conceive that these individuals could have done any good for their countries. We have seen the West railroading corporate structures of the Third World countries into oblivion and brainwashing us over the media into believing that it was a holy move. Example — the mighty Third World bank which was considered such a threat to the western world financial superstructures that it was demolished with the stroke of a pen.

The crime — it was doing what the great financial house of the West was doing. Only it dared to enter the restricted territory!

The filthiest places in the country housing many of the poor is often shown in the Western media as the normal housing conditions available to all. This is a flagrant display of Goebbels theory of how to turn a lie into a truth.

On a number of my visits overseas, I was asked, if we live in thatched houses and do we still use letterwriters? The tragedy is that the Third World countries do not have the means to counter this negative publicity.

Politically we have shed imperialism, but media-wise?

M Rashid
Magh Bazar, Dhaka.

Tourism month

Sir, Perhaps by observing tourism month from October 15 to November 16, 1993, Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation is proving that 'empty vessel sounds much'.

We wonder who drew the month-long so called tourism programme, why, what for?

It appears that tourism month is not meant mainly for the tourists, domestic or foreign, but it is more intended for fun and pleasure, joy and merit — also for a handful of officers, staff and their family members of the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism and Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation. It is alleged that many of the officers and staff of Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation remain absent from their desks and duties!

We do not know what amount of budget allocation has

been made and sanctioned by the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism and the Ministry of Finance for the extravaganza of 'tourism' in the public sector.

The heart and soul of tourism is travelling. In Bangladesh there are many attractive tourist spots but most of the tourists, both domestic and foreign, cannot go or afford to visit those places due to communication problem, exorbitant transportation cost, sky high rate of lodging and food there.

True, Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation has some motels, cottages in Cox's Bazar, Bogra, Rangpur, Rajshahi and Ramgati where most of the time some business magnates, traders, contractors and bureaucrats happen to stay more than the tourists. The air-conditioned cars available at Corporation's head office in Dhaka are used by the high officials of the Corporation maybe in absence of tourists while the luxury transports and coaches are beyond the reach of the common people.

We would be grateful if the authorities concerned kindly let us know the number of tours alongwith the number of tourists, domestic and foreign, the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation has conducted last year and the number of tours the Parjatan Corporation has so far conducted from Dhaka to Cox's Bazar, Rangamati, the Sunderbans etc during the current tourism month (October 15 to November 16, 1993, and what is the cost per tour, per tourist?

In fact, tourism in Bangladesh is in a mess and

the so-called tourism month may not change the situation at all.

We would very much appreciate if the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism and Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation do something practical, pragmatic to quench the thirst of a large number of both domestic and foreign tourists.

Oll Kabir
Dhaka 1203.

Share application forms

Sir, Thank you for publishing the letter of Mr Zahirul Haque titled "Participation in share market" in your esteemed daily on 6.10.93. In fact it is a long standing demand of the people of the small cities and remote areas of the country to allow the use of hand written/typed forms (as per proforma of the companies) for application for shares of the public limited companies.

People like us who stay at the remote islands of the country like Hatiya, Sandwip, Moshkhali, Kutubdia etc can apply for these shares if only typed/hand written application forms are entertained.

We strongly urge upon the Securities and Exchange Commission to make it mandatory for the public limited companies offering shares to public to allow hand written/typed forms for application of shares.

Shahjalal
Boaltla, Charking, Hatiya, Noakhali