

Ominous Developments in Russia

There were actually two elections in Russia. One was a referendum on a new draft Constitution, which was tailor made by Yeltsin to suit his own political needs. The other was to elect new members to the parliament which was dissolved, and subsequently assailed upon by the military, again to suit Yeltsin's needs. As for making a powerful presidency, he has won. In his attempt to get a friendly parliament, he lost most miserably.

A meagre turnout of only 53.2 per cent voters, only slightly over the 50 per cent mandatory turnout to make the election valid, is the biggest blow to Yeltsin. The most worrisome development is the rise of ultra-nationalist forces of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. The man who fought the elections on the platform of bringing back the Tsarist glory to mother Russia, repudiates the rights of all the breakaway republics to their independence and wants to bring them all back under Russia's fold. Zhirinovskiy's election success has been welcomed by Germany's neo-fascist People's Union leader Gerhard Frey, who visions a greater Germany including present day Poland, and Serbia's ultra-nationalist Radical Party leader Vojislav Serelj.

At the time of writing this comment, unofficial results from 53 of Russia's 89 regions were available, in which the ultra-nationalist Liberal Democrats got 24.53 per cent of the votes, and Yeltsin-backed Russia's Choice Party got only 14.46 per cent, closely followed by the Communists who got 11.31 per cent. Clearly, Yeltsin got a smart rebuff from the voters. Even for his new Constitution, only 25-30 per cent of the Russians have actually approved it. The clear winner of this election is Zhirinovskiy and his party. Already danger signals have gone out in the former Soviet republics who have recently gained their independence from the iron embrace of the Soviet Union. Baltic leaders are meeting at the Estonian capital to discuss the implication of the rise in Moscow of a party that seeks to re-annex them.

To put it bluntly, the Yeltsin engineered election has opened up a whole range of dangerous possibilities. The Western powers — who have so far given total support to Yeltsin — will now have to devise ways to counter them. Western Europe has been experiencing the rise of neo-fascists. The outcome in Moscow will obviously add fuel to this trend, now prominent in Germany, France and Italy.

We would like to still believe that the vote for Zhirinovskiy is not an expression of the Russians' intrinsic preference for ultra-nationalism, but more a result of the economic crisis and the resultant dire hardship that they are facing. It is a lesson of history that acute economic crisis breeds populist and fascist movements. It is reported that Zhirinovskiy is an admirer of Hitler and he definitely preaches the same message of aggression and territorial expansion as his hero did. So the only answer is massive and quick economic growth to turn the Russian public away from the ultra-nationalists' appeal.

So where does, and can, the highly ambitious Yeltsin go from here? The parliament, which he literally gunned down a few months ago for opposing his reforms, will now do so with greater vigour and power.

We, as a part of the developing world, are alarmed at the turn of events in Russia, and regret the fact that Western democracies are coming under increasing influence and pressure of extreme-rightwing groups. This may impact negatively upon the traditional close relation between Western democracies and the developing countries.

Hard Road to PLO Homeland

Frantic efforts are underway to save the peace accord reached between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) in Washington on September 13. The historic agreement signed by the two parties — once arch enemies of each other — provided for the beginning of the process of Israeli troops' withdrawal from Monday next. That process has received a severe blow with the unrelenting violence in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank region of Jericho. It seems the opponents of the accord — both Palestinian and Jewish extremists — have been successful in scoring a few telling points.

Although the developments in the region to be granted limited autonomy according to the agreed plan have not yet succeeded to bring upon it an irrevocable set back, it has already done enough damage in that it will delay the troops' pull-out from the occupied region. The April 13 deadline for a complete withdrawal of Israeli forces now looks increasingly remote. The odds are against the PLO ranks that held several rounds of secret negotiations with the Israeli government in Norway to pave the way for the agreement. Other radical Palestinian guerilla groups have rejected the peace accord, terming it too little and too late; they have even blamed Yasser Arafat for the sale-out of the Palestinian cause. With the mounting military operation in the area and fuelling hostility between the Jewish settlers and the Palestinians in the occupied Gaza territory, the PLO armed cadres are getting restive.

As things stand today, the physical challenges are enormous and the preparations for the take-over of the civilian administration of Jericho is not going the way it should have done. Of course, the Palestinian youths' training in Cairo to deal with terrorists and other elements responsible for inciting sectarian violence can be considered a progress in terms of practical achievement. But the real challenge of logistics and other material supports for the purpose has not been adequately met. The brokers of peace between the Israelis and Palestinians surely had quite a stake in this matter. Already, the economic involvement has been worked out by different economic institutions and regional bodies for the transition of civil administration of the region. But the huge funds are yet to be made available for the actual work.

It is not just the signatory parties which are concerned about the accord, there are others who would dislike to see the falling through of the agreement. But their willingness has to be practically complemented by material supports. Presently, Egypt is doing its part quite admirably. The Egyptian president has been host to the delegations from Israeli and Palestinian sides. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Arafat will once again meet in Cairo within 10 days and hopefully try to overcome the obstacles in the way of the accord's implementation.

Giving the Local Institutions a Chance to Help

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

by Abu S Azad

WITHOUT any criticism of the past or present we should look at the potentials currently at our disposal to build up and strengthen our future. We know that the key to accelerate an sustain social development is to build up the capacity of the local institutions/bodies and through these institutions channelling the services to the community and also empowering them with knowledge as well as facilitating or creating environment for as much self-help as possible. Unlike many countries we do not have village level organised community structure, but we have elected local bodies like union parishads in the rural area and Pourashovas for the Urban areas. These local bodies have a lot of limitations, but still they can and should, particularly the union parishads, play a vital role in social development.

We are not advocating for additional manpower or resources for the union parishad, but we are thinking of an effective coordinating role of the union parishads in government's on-going social development efforts and activities. Several formal or non-formal development efforts and activities are now going on in each union. A considerable number of workers/staff are assigned in each union to carry out these activities. Most of these efforts are sectoral and without any linkage with each other and therefore not mutually supportive. As a result, the desired impact on the community has been insignificant. Here, we want to say that if all these efforts/activities which are nothing but valuable resources and potential of the union, can be harnessed in an organised and coordinated manner, a lot can happen and sustain. This coordination role can easily be played by the union parishads with the support of various heads of the government department/agency in each thana. The main theme of this approach is to empower the community through community management and to ensure accountability of the Civil Servants to the people.

Hence an outline to establish this approach is given below:

Union Parishad
STEP 1: Each Union Parishad will convene a meeting (first meeting) at the union level which will be participated by all thana level sectoral heads of all government departments/agencies and their respective workers including bank officials working within the union. The main workers/staff are school teachers, ATEOs, Health and Family Welfare workers, PHE staff, Social Welfare workers, BRDB workers and Agriculture, Live Stock and Fisheries staff and others. Non-formal actors within the union such as NGOs, Imams, Social clubs, local leaders/elders should also be invited to this meeting. In the meeting the sector heads will explain the mandates of their respective departments/agencies and describe how their workers are trying to achieve this. The workers will explain their experience, positive and negative, and also the support and cooperation required from the people and other agencies. Through deliberation and discussion a more effective method/procedure for each department/agency will be thrashed out together with support and cooperation needed from other departments/agencies. The agreed procedures/methods will then be followed by the staff/workers of each department/agency under the guidance for their respective departmental supervisors.

The same group will again meet after two months and review the progress. Any constraint/problem identified should be removed by modifying the procedure or by the intervention of the union parishad. Henceforth, the group will meet bi-monthly without any interruption. All meetings will

ways be held at union level. All parties should take this in the spirit of a challenge for national development.

STEP 2: Due to the activities carried out as stated above it is expected that interaction between the government workers/staff and the people will increase to a great extent and formation of community level structure will be required. A para of a cluster of 30-50 families can constitute a community. The government workers responsible for an area should jointly help formation of these communities with the help of the UP member concerned. Each community should select a team of 9-13 members of which 60% will be Women. This team will be responsible to interact and follow up with the community under its jurisdiction for the intended development. The respective government workers will meet with each community at least bi-monthly through meetings organised with the help of the team. At the bi-monthly union level meetings representatives from the community teams should attend and participate in the discussion.

STEP 3: Each sectoral department/agency will train/retrain their workers in the light of the new approach and the changes that may take place.

STEP 4: Needs and demands for training from the community will crop up which must be met by the union parishad with the assistance of the respective sectors. The GOB should mobilise fund for this.

STEP 5: This part is optional. This is about creating a fund in the union parishad. The source of fund will be voluntary contribution by a philanthropist and/or zakat paid by any individual. This fund should be used mainly for training the community people to attain self-reliance and also to give interest-free loan to the poor to help in income generation. To operationalise this fund, the UP will need an extra hand which may be provided from this fund.

As this process continues regularly more people-oriented approach will emerge which can be eventually adopted by the respective union parishad.

Pourashava
As regards Pourashavas it is often said that they are weak in many respects which is probably true. But, we should not stop at that point. Like the developed nations of the world, we should aim to make the

pourashavas self-supportive, institutionally as well as financially as far as provision of services to the poura people are concerned. It must be recognised that persisting the dependence of the pourashavas on the central government agencies, sustainability of the services will never be achieved. The sooner the pourashavas become self-reliant, at least institutionally, the better it is. In view of this we should think of short term as well as long term objectives for the pourashavas to become self supportive. And in view this, we may set 3-year, 5-year and 7-year responsibility goals for the pourashavas and initiate intervention to help build up strengths commensurate with responsibility.

The foregoing are a few suggestions and there can be better thoughts which should be welcome. But, the point is that pursuing traditional system will take us no where, and we must think something different, which must also be given a chance to work. We sincerely hope that the appropriate authority in the government will give due consideration to this.

The author is Project Officer, UNICEF, Bangladesh. The views expressed are strictly of the author and UNICEF is in no way concerned or responsible.

South Africa Enters Most Dangerous Stage

by Derek Ingram

POWER has slipped away from a parliament in South Africa elected by whites only to a transitional body elected by nobody. For six months, this Transitional Executive Council (TEC) made up of representatives of 21 political parties will run the country in tandem with President F.W. de Klerk's white government.

The real power now lies with the TEC — a remarkable development, since the white minority is in effect giving way voluntarily to the black majority. In history it is difficult to find a precedent. The whites in Zimbabwe surrendered only after a 15-year war, although it has to be realised that the South African whites have been under pressure, violent and otherwise, for decades.

The inevitability of change has finally impressed itself on the majority of the white population of South Africa, which came to tire of its international pariah status. Arguments as to whether sanctions finally tipped the scales will be the stuff of academic debate for decades to come, but at the very least they made life increasingly uncomfortable for the whites.

The whites found themselves excluded from international sport, a bitter pill for a South African, travel became increasingly irksome and embarrassing, and business was denied the real expansion of which it was capable. The rand fell in a few years to a quarter of its value.

The big question now is how seriously the disgruntled elements in South Africa's polyglot

The most dangerous phase of the South African transition has begun. Voices warning of greater violence and even civil war are growing louder. At the same time, the achievement of the two-year talks between 21 parties is remarkable. The main body of whites, reports Gemini News Service in this analysis, have in effect given up power voluntarily.



GENERAL CONSTAND VIJOEN
Key figure on the right

community will seek to disrupt the transitional process. The Inkatha Freedom Party of Chief Gatsha Buthelezi and disparate elements of the white right boycotted the multi-party talks and have refused to sign the agreement changing the constitution. They say they will boycott the elections on April 27.

These two groups have formed an unholy alliance known as the Freedom Alliance. It is hardly likely to hold together for long. A key player is General Constand Viljoen, retired head of the South African Defence Force (SADF), who

leads the Afrikaner Volksfront (People's Front). He wants the Afrikaners to be given their own Boer homeland for 25 years, but he is not an extremist of the type of Eugene Terre-Blanche who as leader of the Afrikaner Resistance Movement cries regularly for war with the blacks and flies Nazi-like colours.

Viljoen is a man with whom the African National Congress still believes it can do business and in recent weeks the ANC chairman, Thabo Mbeki, and his colleagues have been trying to do just that. The ANC is so ready to find common ground with all the elements in the complex South African political tapestry that it is even prepared to consider the Afrikaner homeland idea.

In the long negotiations that have ended the old order, the ANC and the Nationalists have made huge concessions to meet each other. The ANC has stuck to its stand for a unitary state, but the nine new regions into which the country is to be divided will have considerable powers in areas such as education, health, welfare, and policing.

The regions will write their own constitutions. On the other hand, the central government can intervene to maintain national standards and in matters of security. It is not federalism,

to which the ANC remains bitterly opposed, but it is some way in that direction.

In the early days of the talking the ANC dropped its ideas of wholesale nationalisation and as time went on it increasingly accepted maintenance of the market system. As power at last came within sight and the global trend moved away from socialism, concessions came on many of the ANC's long-held tenets.

Yet the bigger concessions came from the government side, which started by saying it would not allow the majority to rule, moved to talk of power-sharing and has now accepted a situation where it will in effect be very much the junior partner in a government of national unity.

This transitional government cannot be changed until 1999, but under the rules the president will be elected by a national assembly which is sure to have a majority of ANC members and so will choose Nelson Mandela. The first deputy president, who will act as prime minister, will also come from the majority party and the second deputy president is to come from the second largest party, likely to be the National Party and therefore President F.W. de Klerk.

The cabinet will comprise

members of all parties winning more than five per cent of the national vote, so the power will be shared for the first five years, but if, as seems certain, the ANC overwhelmingly wins the election, it will inevitably be the predominant voice.

In the last hours of the negotiation government chief negotiator Roelof Meyer made concessions that watered down the power-sharing. The majority needed to break deadlocks in cabinet was reduced from two-thirds to 50 per cent, which will almost certainly give the ANC the decisive say.

The threat to a peaceful transition from extremists on both sides remains as great as ever. The chance of Buthelezi joining the agreement and calling off his threat to boycott the election seems remote, and may get even slimmer as he realises that large numbers of his Zulu followers are likely to ignore his orders and vote for the ANC. His own hierarchy is divided and the chances of the Freedom Alliance with its odd bedfellows hanging in together are also small.

The ANC has had long talks with Viljoen, who it regards as detachable from the Alliance and particularly from people like Terre-Blanche. The Commonwealth Secretary-General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, has just been talking again with all the parties and in a meeting with Viljoen tried to persuade him to moderate his position. Viljoen commands strong support among the police and army whose loyalty to the settlement is vital.

Mandela, whose energy at the age of 84 is amazing everybody, and de Klerk are now facing the most dangerous period of this exercise in change. The chances of its all going wrong are very real and many people like the veteran anti-apartheid campaigner Archbishop Trevor Huddleston are at pains to warn that the agreement signed on November 17 is not the end of the road to democracy in South Africa but only the beginning.

Under the settlement the old homelands are wiped out. Most of the ten accept the situation, albeit with reluctance. They are dependent on funds from the National government and have little alternative. The resistance of two of them, Bophuthatswana and Ciskei, could cause serious disruption, although only Bophuthatswana can be economically independent of the centre.

The time to organise the election in a land where almost no one has ever voted before is all too short, but it is vital that there should be no postponement. The problems are huge. In the absence of any registration of voters. With many people having no record of their births, it will, for example, often be impossible to establish the age of teenagers arriving at the polling stations.

Monitoring on a large-scale will be essential and yet, with 9,000 polling stations, it will be impossible to watch everything. So far the United Nations is planning to send 2,000 observers and the European Union 310. The Commonwealth team will be much smaller, but it prides itself on providing quality rather than quantity. One novel feature is that the Election Commission is to include five international personalities as members.

DEREK INGRAM is Editor of Gemini News Service

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.

Culture of recommendations

Sir, Recently it has been reported in the newspapers that some people tried to obtain release of a couple from a police station by producing a forged recommendation from the Home Minister. The policemen were intelligent enough to comprehend the forgery.

From above, one may easily presume that our ministers and others with high socio-economic and political status recommend for various purposes and usually they are honoured. They are so effective that people are inspired to forge them on emergency wherever and wherever they do not have access to the influential and powerful. Writing is one form of communicating recommendations. Probably, the most important and subtle advices are conveyed over phone. This safeguards the interests of the person recommending in a sense that in a future date when things will not be favourable for him, nobody can retrace for framing charges and the authority receiving the recommendation can easily verify the genuineness.

Recommendation is not something new or peculiar to Bangladesh. Since time immemorial it has been in vogue and world-wide accepted. Now-a-days, when the different offices advertise for jobs, they advise the candidates to mention names and addresses of referees. This is done to justify the credibility of the candidates. In the past, recommendations

were made to confirm credibility, integrity and genuineness of the persons. But today, such recommendations do not carry any value. Recommendations, believably, are made for some specific purposes obviously currying favour with an unwritten and unspoken influence that if you don't, I won't....

As a result in our country, we have been suffering from certain set backs:

Influential uncle syndrome: Our youths feel that whatever quality, efficiency, proficiency one might have, one cannot get the suitable position without an influential uncle's backing. Consequently, everybody has become busy finding a good connection and not achieving knowledge. The standard in every sphere of life has fallen terribly. Resultantly, often wrong persons hold wrong offices heightening disarray and confusions. The majority is suffering from perpetual frustration.

Justice is hindered: On the strength of recommendations, as it is alleged, sometimes criminals go scot free and innocent people are subjected to immense miseries.

Certificate bonanza: has overshadowed the spirit of acquiring knowledge. In the past, if somebody graduated, the hearsay goes like this that everybody would look up to him with awe considering the knowledge that he had gathered and today if somebody produces a masters degree certificate, on that merit, one cannot be sure of capability of the certified person. The screen of doubts mists

our vision. In those days, no doubt, one had to learn to pass an examination and today everybody would agree. That the number of certificate holders have stupendously increased but many of them struggle hard to express themselves in proper language. As the certificates accompanied by recommendations do well everywhere, people are after certificates and not learning.

Many sorts of changes/reforms are taking place in our country but nobody is hopeful. Still the recommended but inefficient persons are going to captain our ship without vision and purpose. Can't our democratically elected government take measures to exile recommendations with the unspoken and unwritten clause that 'if you don't, I won't....'?

John Arun Sarkar
Protap Das Lane, Dhaka.

Of an appeal

Sir, It was really frustrating to listen to the recent appeal for donation through TV, by ICDDR,B, an international and non-profit organization which is knowingly funded by foreign donors and is run and managed by both local and international scholars. Surprisingly, the appeal was made by a local and primarily a profit seeking organization. I have no reason to mean that the organization I am mentioning about is a small and unrenowned one rather it is very big in its own sphere and I have no doubt about it.

My point is how ICDDR,B could allow an organization to avail of the opportunity of appeal for donation? As a person in this profession I feel the gains against this TV publicity would be derived in terms of few millions of Taka.

Finally, let me remain with the interest as to who has gained in this deal, whether it is

ICDDR,B or the promoter of the appeal? I hope my interest would not remain unanswered for long.

Nawab Sobhan
3/9/D Lalmatia, Dhaka.

Without trial

Sir, Falu Mia is now the talk of the media. Falu Mia was recently released from jail at the initiative of the Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR) after 22 years of imprisonment without any trial.

In the evening of the 45th World Human Rights Day (Friday, Dec. 10, 1993), the Bangladesh Television in its 'Manobadhiker' magazine programme introduced Falu Mia with the audiences. It was stated in the TV report that no paper regarding Falu Mia's case could be found either in jail, court or in relevant thana files. Well, I personally cannot accept the fact that none of these government departments have preserved or maintained any record about the case of Falu Mia. I think, the Ministry of Home should investigate into the matter.

In the same programme, a TV report was presented on Karunamole Sarder's murder case, the culprits of which are yet to be brought to book. We would strongly call upon the government to take stern steps for arresting the persons associated with the murder of Karunamole and put them in trial. We would also honestly request the government to pay direct compensations to Falu Mia because, in my opinion, the responsibility for keeping Falu Mia behind the bars for no reason should be shouldered by the state.

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OPINION

Economic Envoy

Dr A Majeed Khan

When something happens close to one's home and the occasion is something like a fulfillment, one feels a commitment to welcome the augury. More than a decade and a half ago, in 1977, in a conversation with late President Ziaur Rahman I told him how Bangladeshis serving in good positions in economic and international development organizations abroad can help the economic development of the country. I explained to him how this may be achieved. (It is something of the nature of economic intelligence of which the 'scope and prospect is still there and may even be brighter now. So, I would not detail it here). However, the President showed a keen interest and for the proof of the idea I started to provide him with some studies and economic intelligence about Bangladesh to which our business or diplomatic missions abroad had no formal access.

After more than a year or even longer, when I met the President again, he asked me for a proposal to actualize the idea we had shared. I sent him the proposal. I learned that at his behest then Finance Minister, Prof. M.N. Huda, called a meeting to discuss the proposal. I was told about this meeting by one who was then a Joint Secretary of the Ministry and perhaps the one directly concerned. After a long lapse, I was informed by a note from our embassy to the effect that

after due consideration my proposal had been shelved. Somebody told me that the Minister did not think much about economic intelligence and commented that there would be foreign investment in the country only when the investors would find it profitable.

But the late President did not take away his mind from the idea we had nurtured for two/three years. I conjecture that he was unhappy about the Ministry's decision on my proposal. Sometime later I learned that the President had drawn up a panel of the members of the parliament (MPs) to serve as his economic envoys. I met some of those envoys on their overseas tour and heard how disgusted the foreign office representatives were about these intruders.

I am very happy that the Prime Minister has thought afresh the role of economic intelligence in the economic and industrial development of the country and chose as her first envoy from among the best of entrepreneurs and industrialists in Bangladesh. Congratulations to Madam Prime Minister and congratulations to our new Economic Envoy. However, to make the action well-argued one for our economy, both the Prime Minister and Mosharraf Khan (a patron of TUB) must guard against the pitfalls of bureaucratic inertia.

The writer is President, IUB