

Why the Strike?

Demanding satisfaction of their 5-point charter of demands within a week, the Bangladesh Chemists' and Druggists' Samity shuttered the drug stores all over the country Monday and have threatened further strikes on January 10 and 11. An indefinite countrywide shutdown is also on the cards from January 26. On the very face of the ultimatum absurdity is writ large because that which could not be resolved for months together cannot be wished away in a few days' time.

The chemists association is seeking withdrawal of the 50 per cent increase in the drug licence renewal fees effected since July last year. The other four points of their charter of demands are increase in the commission on wholesale and retail trading of medicines, adequate training for the pharmacists and issuance of new drug licences, now being held up.

The demands are clearly in two categories. The enhancement of the licence renewal fee was a fiscal step taken by the Finance Ministry. The matter had better be sorted out at the pre-budgeting stage or even after the announcement of the budget when, for some days, the scope remained for reconsideration of any fiscal proposal. This does not mean that a demand having some rationality cannot be raised at a later date.

As for the other demands, barring the one for resumption of the issuance of new drug licences, like enhancement of commission fees on wholesale and retail trade and guarantee for the adequate training of the pharmacists, one wonders where the government is directly involved. These demands should be directed inward — mainly to the private sector drug manufacturers and the business houses or networks. The government supplies drugs worth between Tk 30 and 35 crore to the medicines market that commands a total sale of Tk. 900 crore annually. The TCB should be responsible for fixing the rates of commission to the extent of its own supplies. And in a free market it is left to the private industrial and business houses to set the terms of commission or profit to their wholesalers and retailers.

On the issue of licensing in general two deviations are to be cited by way of underlining how chaotic the medicines business has grown. Many surreptitiously deal in smuggled medicines netting good profits. And 40,000 drug stores are operating without any licence in stark contrast to 22,000 licensed dealers. No wonder spurious and substandard drugs have intruded on the market. Add to all these the sale of drug licences, palmed off from hand to hand, in the black market, at exorbitant rates.

The seven-day ultimatum has been obviously resorted to have a discussion with the Health Ministry on the druggists' demands. In other words, it is accepted that without dialogues the problems cannot be solved. Reports indicate that the Health Ministry took too long a time to recognise their demands and it did nothing more than recommend them to the Finance Ministry at a later stage. Both the ministries seem to have dragged their feet. The public will be at the receiving end of all woes so long as the organisers of strikes think an increase in people's suffering can only force the government to act and the government functionaries visualise that such a public inconvenience will only deface the organisers.

We believe no matter what the demands are — whatever their merits and demerits — these can be addressed squarely through dialogues and patient negotiations. Cessation of work as an expression of a democratic right is acceptable only under certain circumstances. It cannot be an everyday affair. In our peculiar economic situation this extreme measure should only be taken after all other democratic means have been exhausted. If we fail to go by this simple rule, we shall even risk being unpatriotic.

Idea Worth a Try

When the city's facilities for garbage disposal are under severe strain, the idea of handing part of the responsibility over to the private entrepreneurs should be considered a welcome relief. Initially the clearing of muck in three posh residential areas of the city will be made a private responsibility, so says a report carried in this paper yesterday. Although not an innovative idea in the developed countries, the handling of the garbage collection and its safe disposal here are certainly a new initiative involving a lot of courage and perhaps a little risk too.

Why the move is new needs no explanation but the elements of boldness and risk in the whole exercise cannot be fully understood unless the relative inexperience of our private agencies in this matter is taken into reckoning and the future shape of the complex problem visualised now. The first drawback perhaps can be overcome over time through various means ranging from training for the workers to application of sophisticated technology. But the future complications arising out of a possible disposal site and the tripartite — residents, government or city corporation and private agency — contract or agreement for the performance of the task look formidable enough and cannot be glossed over.

Apparently, there is nothing to discourage the move. After all both the private and the public agencies responsible for garbage disposal will have enough scope to prove their points through competition they are sure to be locked in. If the private agency serves better, it will have the rightful claim to extending its area of operation. If it fares worse compared to its public counterpart, the residents will have every reason to get rid of the bad performer. Accountability will be made a point of.

Hopefully, the private agency to take the responsibility will not give a poor account of itself. Its efficiency and modern methods ought to induce the existing lethargic fleet of the Dhaka City Corporation to seriously get into the business. An efficient and clean job should not necessarily involve imposition of more taxes on the residents. The Dhakaites feel taxed enough already and have been on the look-out for commensurate services — to be candid.

However, both the private and public means of garbage disposal can be improved if the proposed — now stalled — garbage treatment plant can be established. Such a plant will not only solve the problem of a dumping site but also meet a substantial portion of the disposal cost. A recycling plant and a bio-gas plant would be the ideal choice in dealing with the huge waste matter collected everyday. Certainly, this can be an effective answer to the environmental pollution caused by unplanned and half-hearted collection of city garbage. A revision of the relevant laws — if necessary — should be made to overcome health and environmental hazards caused by indiscreet garbage disposal.

WE have the knack of missing the substance and concentrating on the superficial. The deluge of comments on Manmohan Singh's resignation, how good he was as finance minister or how indispensable was his continuance, submerged the real issue of ministerial responsibility. Some Congressmen even phoo-phooed the principle of moral propriety in a parliamentary system of governance.

Praises showered on Manmohan Singh were not misplaced. Nobody had ever doubted his integrity. He is the lifeline in the choppy and charless sea of liberalisation where we have been thrown. In fact, his name has become synonymous with the investment and loans from abroad. And as a leading country's envoy in Delhi put it: 'Were Manmohan Singh to be run over by a bus, it would be a big international news.'

But the point at issue was never Manmohan Singh. It was accountability, ability to answer for one's behaviour, whether or not a minister, however brilliant, was responsible for the mess in his own backyard. In the chorus of demands to retain him, the debate on minister's moral obligation got politicised.

The Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) had reportedly gone out of the way not to mention his name so as to have a unanimous report. But it could not have possibly skipped his ministry's over-indulgence towards some of the bureaucrats, who had once served with him. Nor could it have condoned the ministry's reluctance to apply the correctives even when the scam

came to light. — That Manmohan Singh is an honourable man goes without saying. He took no time in submitting his resignation in response to Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's reported advice to own partial responsibility, he is believed to have said that either he was guilty or not guilty and that there was no half-way house in such matter. His firmness against relentless pressures was commendable. But these plus points had to be weighed against the trust and ethical considerations which a minister is supposed to uphold.

In his exuberance, Manmohan Singh took too much on his plate. Newly inducted to politics as he is, he was naive in making some of the statements. For example, even before the JPC began its probe, he said that no politician was involved. Again, defending his old colleague Venkittaraman, former Reserve Bank Governor, Manmohan Singh said he would resign if Venkittaraman was asked to quit. But no explanation of his gullibility can counter the bungling in the finance ministry.

Manmohan Singh's casual attitude has been his fault. There is no reason why the best of ministers should not pay the price for it. However, it was after a long time that a tall minister has followed the

logic of moral propriety at the Centre. This was credible on the part of Manmohan Singh because the Narasimha Rao government is full of such ministers as have stuck to office despite the aspersions cast on their credibility.

Take B. Shankaranand and Rameshwar Thakur. They should have quit long ago because their complicity in the scam became public some months ago when the JPC was still in the midst of taking evi-

dence. Even after the publication of the report, they did not offer their resignations. The two other ministers, Kalpanath Rai and Balram Singh Yadav, are also involved in irregular investments in the public sector undertakings under their ministries. They too do not seem to have been bothered about the JPC's remarks. They are behaving as if nothing has happened.

But then that has become a practice in the Narasimha Rao government. Several ministers have charges pending against them. But they are going on merrily. Railway minister Jaffar Sharif has yet to clear his

name regarding the land he has acquired near Bangalore. An official inquiry into the deal does not absolve him. The embarrassed Karnataka chief minister Veerappa Moily has referred the matter to a ministerial committee to stall action. But what about Sharif's moral propriety?

Petroleum minister Satish Sharma has admitted receiving remittances worth Rs. 42.71 lakh from his younger brother in America. But he has conveyed overbearing pretension. He lets ministers go their own way so long as they do not become a nuisance.

The debate on the scam in and outside parliament has revealed the names of ministers. But not all improprieties originated at the political level. There are dozens of public servants who are involved and some of them have made money in the share market. A few of them appear to have stretched the meaning of not only the rules and regulations but also orders. It is time that the government provides safe-guards to ensure that instructions are implemented in letter and spirit in which they are issued. Any dichotomy in this regard is an invitation to the unscrupulous among the officers, as happened during the 10-year-long span of scam.

No doubt, Narasimha Rao has given the assurance that none would be spared. Political consideration will ultimately dictate action against ministers and political pressures in the case of public servants. All the past is any guide, all will end in a big whiff. The Rao government is not known for chastising the corrupt and the recalcitrant.

Ministers at least go back to the electorate and their acts of omission and commission are discussed threadbare by their

Can't See the Wood for Trees

Praises showered on Manmohan Singh were not misplaced. Nobody had ever doubted his integrity. He is the lifeline in the choppy and charless sea of liberalisation where we have been thrown.

But the point at issue was never Manmohan Singh. It was accountability, ability to answer for one's behaviour, whether or not a minister, however brilliant, was responsible for the mess in his own backyard.

opponents. This is a poetic justice of sorts. However, the bureaucrats at worst leave the department or revert to the cadre of the state. No real action is taken against them.

But as the chairman of a select committee of the US Senate said once: "No nation has ever found any inconvenience from too close an inspection into the conduct of its officers, but many have been brought to ruin and reduced to slavery by suffering gradual impositions and abuses which are imperceptible, only because the means of publicity had not been secured." Our civil servants have seldom been put on the mat. Let the action against the scam-soiled servants be public and the entire process of trial be open.

A democratic system will cease to evoke respect if those who rule, ministers as well as the bureaucrats, are seen lacking integrity. When people find it happening and also see them getting away with all their misdeeds, they become cynical. Their sensitivity gets coarsened. Some of them take to the gun to ventilate their anger. Most of violent movements in the country owe their origin to the loss of faith in those who occupy the chair.

The scam should make us more wary about public functionaries and ministers. The entire system has got corrupted and it has affected the credibility of every segment of our society. It is as if everyone is trying to have as big a share in the loot as he can grab. The government's placid reaction to the scam has shown that it cannot see the wood for trees. Can others do so? They too seem stuck in rhetoric and political maneuvering.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

denial. Even after the publication of the report, they did not offer their resignations. The two other ministers, Kalpanath Rai and Balram Singh Yadav, are also involved in irregular investments in the public sector undertakings under their ministries. They too do not seem to have been bothered about the JPC's remarks. They are behaving as if nothing has happened.

But then that has become a practice in the Narasimha Rao government. Several ministers have charges pending against them. But they are going on merrily. Railway minister Jaffar Sharif has yet to clear his

name regarding the land he has acquired near Bangalore. An official inquiry into the deal does not absolve him. The embarrassed Karnataka chief minister Veerappa Moily has referred the matter to a ministerial committee to stall action. But what about Sharif's moral propriety?

Petroleum minister Satish Sharma has admitted receiving remittances worth Rs. 42.71 lakh from his younger brother in America. But he has conveyed overbearing pretension. He lets ministers go their own way so long as they do not become a nuisance.

The debate on the scam in and outside parliament has revealed the names of ministers. But not all improprieties originated at the political level. There are dozens of public servants who are involved and some of them have made money in the share market. A few of them appear to have stretched the meaning of not only the rules and regulations but also orders. It is time that the government provides safe-guards to ensure that instructions are implemented in letter and spirit in which they are issued. Any dichotomy in this regard is an invitation to the unscrupulous among the officers, as happened during the 10-year-long span of scam.

A Year of both Frustration and Hope at the UN

NINETEEN ninety-three was a year of both bitter frustrations and bright hopes at the United Nations.

The frustrations centred on its failure to help bring peace and stability to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Somalia, Haiti and Angola.

Its hopes for the future rest on steps toward multiracial democracy in South Africa, progress in the Middle East peace negotiations, a new human rights initiative, and more international cooperation in dealing with developmental and environmental problems.

There are hopes as well because a new administration in the United States was pledged to full cooperation in facing the challenges of the post-Cold War world and to playing an aggressive, strong role in the world organization — and was already turning around some long-standing US policies in demonstration of that cooperation and support.

The year began with another standoff between Baghdad and the UN Security Council's special commission over inspections and documentation. By November, Iraq — hoping to have the 1990 oil embargo lifted — had agreed to accept the UN's plans for long-term monitoring. But commission chairman Rolf Ekeus cautioned that it would take months to determine if Iraq was really cooperating.

The major headaches for the UN were Somalia and the brutal war in Bosnia.

On March 26 the Security Council authorised a revitalised UN Operation in Somalia

(UNOSOM II) to replace a US-led operation that was attempting to restore order and deliver humanitarian aid to thousands of starving Somalis.

The ambitious goals of the new multi-million-dollar, 20,000-strong UNOSOM peace-keeping force, were to disarm the fighting factions, ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid, help the political rehabilitation process and start-up of a new government, and assist Somalia civil society in reestablishing a police force, schools, hospitals and commercial activities — using force if necessary for the first time in UN history.

Unfortunately bloody clashes soon ensued with followers of clan leader Mohammed Farah Aidede — culminating when 18 US troops died in a major fire fight with Aidede supporters some months later. The Security Council then abruptly withdrew its instructions to arrest the clan leader.

Somalia's future remained seriously in doubt at the year's end. Several nations, including the United States and some Western countries, have announced plans to withdraw their contingents from UNOSOM in early 1994, and the Security Council said it will undertake a fundamental review of UNOSOM's mandate.

Despite strong support for negotiations and months of effort by the Security Council, the United Nations has also been unable to forge a cease-fire in Bosnia.

The council imposed tough sanctions on Serbia-Montenegro to isolate the country financially and economically for its efforts to aid the Bosnian-Serbs. But

by December UNPROFOR was valiantly trying to continue to deliver humanitarian aid and the council had stepped back from active involvement in Bosnia.

In another first for the UN, the council also set up a tribunal to prosecute persons accused of war crimes, and other serious violations of international humanitarian law in the former Yugoslav republics, especially Bosnia.

UN efforts to bring peace and political stability in Angola and Haiti also fell short in 1993. UN negotiators were still trying to get a cease-fire between UNITA and the Angolan government — after UNITA refused to accept the results of the UN monitored elections in 1992.

The Governors Island Agreement between deposed Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and General Raoul Cedras signed in July crumpled before Aristide's scheduled October 30 return. The Security Council lifted its economic sanctions against the de facto government and then reimposed them in October.

The destruction by terrorists of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie in 1988 and Libya's refusal to cooperate in the terrorist bombing of a French flight over Niger also occupied a great deal of the Security Council's time. Unable to get Libya to turn over the suspected Pan Am bombers, the Security Council froze Tripoli's assets and embargoed equipment needed by Libya's oil industry as of December 1.

The council's only success was in Cambodia, where the UN Transitional Authority was able

to hold elections. However, the Khmer Rouge refused to participate in the voting and withdrew in November after a new Cambodian government was in place.

The list of trials and failures led many to begin rethinking the whole nature of UN peace-keeping operations.

In his first appearance before the General Assembly in September, President Clinton pledged that "my nation remains committed to helping make the UN's vision a reality," but he also said "the United Nations simply cannot become engaged in every one of the world's conflicts."

"If the American people are to say 'yes' to UN peacekeeping, the United Nations must know when to say 'no,'" the president said. He said the UN also needs technical expertise to run a modern, world class peacekeeping operation and to reform its bureaucracy.

Albright also insisted the UN reform its administration and management, saying "40 years of neglect have left this institution flabby and out of shape" and increasingly unable to meet its growing responsibilities.

Another American, Undersecretary General for Administration Dick Thornburgh, issued a scathing report on the UN bureaucracy as he left his UN post in March after one year on the job. He asserted the UN is hobbled by "deadwood" and totally lacks the means to deal effectively with fraud, waste and abuse.

The General Assembly meanwhile was able to proclaim

and the preservation of the environment." Later in the year the United States announced it would once again support the UN Population Fund.

Vice President Gore received a standing ovation in June when he opened the first session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. Gore told delegates the United States fully supports the commitment made at the 1992 Rio de Janeiro "earth summit" and is "determined to demonstrate real leadership" in charting a new cause for using the world's limited resources.

The assembly then capped its activity by creating the post of High Commissioner for Human Rights to oversee the promotion and protection of human rights around the world. The new commissioner will be a high ranking UN official appointed to a four-year term.

Despite its problems, delegates to the United Nations were convinced by year's end that after decades of Cold War stagnation the organisation once again had the chance to be a force for good in the world.

Clinton summed it up in his speech to the General Assembly: "History has granted to us a moment of even greater opportunity. Old dangers and old walls are crumbling. Future generations will judge us, every one of us... by what we make of this magic moment. Let us resolve that we will dream larger, that we will work harder so that we can conclude that we did not merely turn walls to rubble, but instead laid the foundations for great things to come."

— USIS Feature

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.

New order for South Asia

Sir, This is with reference to the article published in The Daily Star on 11 November, 1993, written by Dr Kamal Hossain, President, Gano Forum.

The learned writer has pointed out the real picture of the political horizon in the South Asian countries, especially Bangladesh. The pledges of independence still remain as dream in South Asia for the overwhelming majority. Only time to time various socio-political, religious/communal and regional groups bring about suffering of the overwhelming majority while motivating the people to gain their objectives. And achievements remain centralised to the elite holding enormous resources and also who can scrounge their rights and privileges in the political situation while the overwhelming majority remain the victims of circumstances. This is also one of the causes of the political instability in the Third World countries and thus, failure of democracy. Governments, in posse, often avail the facilities and also do not hesitate to motivate their activities in contravention of human rights.

Political degeneration mobilises the government machinery in suppressing the real aspiration of the general people. Contradictions in political aims and mobilisation of bureaucrats through the channel of administration vanquish the whole aspects of revolution. Development of political strategy should march with the technocrats and then perhaps the objective of the democratic governments will benefit the overwhelming majority.

The 21st century is just before us with multiple challenges which the people of South Asia will have to face in new dimensions and this forum will help establish required guidelines for the

A village govt prty school

Sir, In a remote area of Naogaon district (P.S. Porsha, Ganguria union) there is the Amda Government Primary School. A primary school was there in the heart of the village some six decades back. The school was run by the local community who took great care so that their own children could benefit most. The teachers of the school, who came from distant areas, were boarded and lodged by the village gentry who were better off than others. Although the school was a mud-brick structure with tin roof, it was well cared of by the local people.

Some six decades back, I attended the Amda Primary School (Private) occasionally (1936-38). We used to sit on the mats, and used 'talpata' and 'khager kalam' for writing. The teachers took their work seriously, or else they would not be there.

It is now a government primary school. There is a classroom without any furniture. The Headmaster has been waiting long for the furniture to come. Amda Primary School is the only one in the Ganguria Union, where a pucca building has not been constructed so far, by the government. For this, however, the school is not very much affected. The school building is in symmetry with the local mud built

houses. Except for the disaster prone areas of Bangladesh, we really need expensive brick built structures? Our expenditure in the education sector has to be cost effective.

One of the teachers of Amda Government Primary School is a young woman in her early twenties. Her home is seven miles away and she has a family to look after. Can she give the necessary attention to her work?

A huge outlay in bricks and mortars, and the appointment of women teachers cannot be a panacea for raising our very low rate of literacy. The BRAC literacy programme has shown us what true dedication and good management can do.

Let our Parliament give us the lead. Whether one is in position or in the opposition, this country belongs to us. Let us also run like others, instead of standing in the same place. Shahabuddin Mahtab Siddheswari Road, Dhaka.

Rohingyas and peace

Sir, We, Rohingyas, the democratic people of Arakan, want to reaffirm our all-out support and solidarity with our beloved leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi who has been unlawfully confined by the so-called SLORC regime for the last four years. The world perhaps has forgotten Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of NLD (National League for Democracy) — the party which won landslide victory in last general election in Burma. It is clear to the world that she is determined to fight against the military junta till the restoration of democracy in Burma where every people would be able to live equally in peace and happiness. She is the leader of all

nationalities as she has the determination for establishment of a true federal union of Burma.

We welcome the memorandum of understanding signed between the SLORC and UN-HCR on Rohingya refugee repatriation and rehabilitation in Arakan. For the completion of the refugees' return home the SLORC must create congenial atmosphere in Arakan. The genuine demand of the Rohingya refugees must be met for the sake of peace in Arakan. No body can deny the right demands of the refugees which are: (1) Burmese junta should be pledge-bound to respect Universal Declaration of Human Right; (2) All black laws designed to deprive the national minorities of their equal rights should be scrapped; (3) Compensation or return of seized properties of the Rohingyas should be made; (4) Rohingya should be accepted as an indigenous race of Burma.

In the month of November the SLORC Secretary General Khin Nyunt had invited all armed organisations to a peace talk with SLORC. We are in favour of a peace talk provided the SLORC is sincerely for a genuine peace. And as a first step Aung San Suu Kyi should be released as a gesture towards that sincerity. Secondly, NCGUB, DAB and other opposition groups should be invited for a direct talk. It is also necessary to transfer the power to the elected representatives of the people.

We do believe that a peace talk by any organisation or party unconditionally willing to negotiate with the SLORC would be understood as an act of betrayal to the entire democratic movement of Burma.

The SLORC is widely regarded as one of the most brutal and repressive regimes in the world. The junta took direct power in 1988 crushing the nationwide democracy uprising by killing a large number of peaceful demonstrators. It ignored the NLD victory in 1990 elections and now stands internationally condemned for systematic repression of political opponents as well as the ethnic and religious minorities.

We believe, to attain freedom and democracy, all ethnic nationalities must unite to set up a true federal union of Burma where equity, equality, rights of self-determination, democracy and basic human rights are guaranteed.

Chairman, Executive Committee, Arakan Democratic Forum, Arakan, Burma

Heart disease and onion

Sir, Though I am not a doctor but from my own experiences at home and abroad, I can say that black tea, without milk and sugar, should be taken from the age of 40 years if one is to be a healthy person. This is one of the good medicines for all kinds of diseases, including heart diseases, diabetes and ageing. Similarly onion should be taken raw without cooking. Apple should be taken without peeling, of course after proper washing. Most of our people can afford black tea, onion and apple to save themselves from heart and other diseases. Medication is costlier than protection by food intake.

M Alauddin West Nakhalpara, Dhaka