

It is Far More than Hurting Just One NGO

In September '92 some 42 thousand mulberry trees were planted on the waysides of the three unions Achargaon, Chandipasha and Nandail. This was part of a project taken up by an NGO to introduce sericulture in this part of Mymensingh. This aimed not only to augmenting national wealth but indeed more to employment generation in the area. The plants grow beautifully for 16 months, thanks to 55 local women volunteers who on receipt a paltry daily support of 3 kilograms of wheat, cared for them faultlessly and with love. Now, some organised miscreants have started cutting the plants down. By mid-January most of the plants have been felled.

The silken approach to poverty alleviation is nothing new. More than two decades back the eminent economist Mohammad Anisur Rahman had very persuasively campaigned for exploiting the silken wealth hanging down from each mulberry tree. As if to vindicate him, although, other belatedly, Rajbari has taken up sericulture with a bang, so to say. Anyone travelling to Rajbari via Gualando more would unfailingly be impressed by the unending array of mulberry trees lining the highway. Yes, Rajbari is already producing very fine silk sarees and a variety of other silk pieces at prices competitive with Rajshahi and at times even excelling that traditional silk centre in quality. The Rajbari success is heart-warming. Led by an NGO it was the ordinary people who materialised the thing in an attempt to get out of the vicious grip of unemployment and poverty.

The three unions of Nandail thana were headed for the same kind of success in employment generation, specially for women, and poverty alleviation who can it be whom the prospect did not suit? Vandalism worked on trees is reprehensible enough in environment-threatened Bangladesh.

But these do not seem to be isolated cases of looting trees for fuel or timber. The circumstances point to a calculated raid mounted on some demented idea of the mulberries portending some change in the social status quo. The calculations became inescapably clear when some semi-formal literary centres of the area, run by the same NGO, were attacked and rampaged. Some people, obviously organised, are out to stall any attempt at changing the lot of the people by industry and education. Their challenge is blatantly clear for all to grasp at what motive is behind their actions. This is no simple act of crime. This is against man and his society, against social and economic and cultural progress. Without the achievement of a minimum level of progress in these sectors, society is bound to stagnate and rot and decline. They are as such against Bangladesh itself.

Anybody can raise questions about any NGO activities. If any organised group has serious objections about the activities of a specific NGO, that also can be ventilated in a systematic, and legally permissible, way. But to burn down schools, or cut down trees, are acts of vandalism that the government must stop — and do so at once. What the hoodlums in Nandail are wreaking falls neatly into a pattern. If government prefers to leave the NGOs, or precisely the hapless women and men out there on the spot to the wolves to mangle, it would do worse than opposing them directly by restricting or banning them. The price for such an act of perfidy would be too high to both the government and society.

What is badly wanted of the government in this situation is immediate action packing such power as can thwart the Nandail nightmare effectively and nip it so that the same cannot sprout anywhere else in the country. The question of the rights and wrongs of NGOs, if there be any, can be sorted out independent of this serious development- and later at a more propitious time.

The government must take an unambiguous position on the matter and act, without any further delay. Or it will harm itself irreparably.

And Now, Cows on the Runway

It seems that ZIA's security is crumbling from all sides. After several cases of illegal passengers boarding aircraft and entering the airport security zone, we now have, according to a report in a Bangla daily, a horde of cows — seven to be exact — leisurely wandering about on the runway. The newly appointed personnel of the private security organisation, Shield, rounded up the cows and prevented any disruption of flights.

It is not usual that cows and aircraft compete for the use of ZIA's runway. However the fact that severe gaps exist in ZIA's security network have come to the surface repeatedly in the last few weeks. The first thing to realise about security, is that it is a very serious business. It is quite apart from restriction, which is how it is commonly understood when we talk about security in our country. Creating more restrictive measures here and there, and harassing innocent or uninformed passengers are not going to enhance ZIA's security. Second thing to remember is that ensuring security at airports is a highly sophisticated business requiring professional skills, which cannot be substituted either by pious intentions, or by seniority of jobs. And finally, we must also understand that security is an expensive business. We need to have adequate technical knowhow and appropriate gadgets to provide effective security.

We would like to argue that the lapses in ZIA's security that have occurred recently, were due to a combination of the above factors. We strongly suggest that a very serious effort be made, perhaps with the help of the security agencies of the country, to devise a highly professional plan for security at our international and national airports. The plan must provide maximum flexibility for the passengers, yet ensure their highest security. The hiring of a private security agency may be alright to prevent the entry of unauthorised people, and of course of the occasional wandering cows. However to defeat the purpose of any organised attempt to breach security, we need a more professional approach. We must remember that the breaches that have occurred so far, have all been amateurish attempts, at best. What will happen, when more sophisticated attempt comes about?

Finally we would like to suggest stern demonstrative actions against those who try to breach security at ZIA. In this regard we regret that no action — so far to our knowledge — has been taken against a group of workers who attacked and damaged the airport recently.

In another of foreign policy, a distinction is often made between a 'high foreign policy' and a 'low foreign policy'. The former concerns national security and survival while the latter deals with matters relating to foreign trade, investment and financial transactions, including aid. Once the high foreign policy is given due care, the next objective of any country's foreign policy is to promote economic advancement through pursuit of low foreign policy. If a country's low foreign policy is directed towards securing aid only at the sheer neglect of trade and investment, the fate of the country might be sealed to aid dependency and in that case, a self-sustaining growth might appear as a forlorn hope.

Aid Driven Foreign Policy

Since its birth as a sovereign nation, like many other least developed countries, Bangladesh's low foreign policy was largely influenced by political considerations. The initial leaning towards the Indo-Soviet axis for aid, trade and investment was the outcome of the role of the allies during the war of liberation. The economic imperatives were, needless to mention, quite different from the political ones. As it emerged, there could hardly be a happy marriage between the two. For example, the conventional lending pattern of the then USSR and Eastern Europe could hardly match the short-run priority needs of the newly-born state. On the other hand, economic relations with Western countries and China were viewed with suspicion; probably, because of their role during the war of liberation.

The abrupt change of Government in August 1975

Trade Policy is Foreign Policy

by Abdul Bayes

was followed by a parametric shift in our low foreign policy agenda. The successive governments, with their hearts on securing more foreign aid, opted for reviving old ties with the USA and China. As a premium to that switch of alignment, massive inflow of aid was in evidence from the principal donor countries at the cost of a fall in assistance from the erstwhile friends. Bangladesh's stand on various international issues at that time also provided a further impetus to the flow of economic assistance to Bangladesh.

Although Bangladesh had been witnessing a flood of aid, the drought with the fragile trade and investment climate, nevertheless, continued unabated. The chilly bites of the classical twogaps in the economy i.e. the saving-investment and the foreign exchange gap continued to be felt by Bangladesh. But, as said earlier, because of a shift out of Indo-Soviet axis, the uninterrupted aid inflow could heal the wounds temporarily. Such an "easy access" to aid basket, probably, made our policy-makers not only lukewarm to a "difficult journey" towards domestic resource mobilization but also made them impotent in the hunt for trade and investment opportunities through diplomatic parleys. Of course, the international trade environment was also very much friendly to Bangladesh when the country relied heavily on the exports of traditional items. The successive coups exacerbated the situation by making political environment

volatile and unfriendly to foreign investment.

Change of Winds

Over the years some changes took place both within and outside Bangladesh providing important ramifications to our national economy. For example, a drift towards free trade as against restricted regimes world-wide, tended to suggest that Bangladesh had to survive through competition and not by charity as far as trade and investment were concerned. On the other hand, the fall of Communist regimes in the USSR and Eastern Europe and the consequent disintegration of the states into new republics have opened up markets for every country. The political changes in the erstwhile communist countries, could however, take toll of Bangladesh economy. Given the massive aid requirements of these new, fragile entities, Bangladesh has to compete with them for aid. The emerging imperatives thus necessitate a revision of our thoughts on aid, investment and trade. In world of growing competitiveness and a shrinking aid climate, it is time to heed the doctrine: "Trade Policy is Foreign Policy".

Doing by Seeing

Trade policy, nowadays, is becoming the major determinant of foreign policy in many countries. For example, experts tend to view that the recent positive developments in the relationship between China and India which were at loggerheads since 1962, could be adduced to the needs being mutually felt for growing trade and investments between these two giants

of Asia. India and China are also employing their foreign policies to melt diplomatic ice with other countries, especially, with those in this part of the world with a view to boosting their trade and investment. Prompted by more or less similar considerations the mending the fence is going on between some other countries of the world.

Looking for the Mines

To start with, Bangladesh should have a close eye on former Soviet Union as well as on current Asia. Russia and other countries in that part of the world could be good markets for Bangladeshi leather, jute, toiletries, tea etc. These markets appear to be in a fluid state where 'first come, first serve' could be the order of things. The gulf states remain a market for many of our non-traditional exportables. Bangladesh should also carefully watch the growth paths of the giants like India and China. It might be necessary to make "jute diplomacy" into an integral part of Bangladesh's foreign policy rather than leave it alone to the premises of Commerce Ministry. A strong diplomatic drive should be on to convince India and China to give up their peripheral jute production and buy from Bangladesh. Bangladesh's growing comparative advantage in jute production should propel a diplomatic drive to the negotiations with India, Nepal and even with Sri Lanka to curb their growth of import substitution. The NIC, in their graduation parade, require a host of labor-intensive inputs and outputs which are being

drawn from other Asian countries. Bangladesh could be a suitable candidate in this respect provided proper diplomatic initiatives are made any the government invests more on human resources development. And last but not least, Bangladesh should make a strong diplomatic bid to have an office of the International Trade Organization in Dhaka. That would help the country in terms of securing information on world trade in goods and services as well as on investment.

Putting the House in Order

Our policy makers, nowadays, have been talking about "Economic Diplomacy" — a timely call indeed. Newspaper reports also suggest that the government has already instructed our diplomats to pursue the diplomacy in right earnest. However, few observations are in order in this respect.

First, the slogan of "economic diplomacy", to have a practical meaning, necessitates a reorientation in our foreign policy conception and rearrangements in the foreign office, too. Historically speaking, the fleet of our diplomats were trained as aid collectors travelling with a beggar's bowl. In many cases, aid diplomacy requires projection of a vivid Bangladesh e.g. millions need food, the domestic resource availability is meagre etc. Trade diplomacy requires just the opposite: the depiction of a bright potential in terms of output of goods and services, the highlights on economics of investment in Bangladesh and the

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PPP Govt Tries to Improve Human Rights Situation in Pakistan

Sajjad Qureshi writes from Islamabad

The formation of first ever Human Rights Commission in Pakistan is an important milestone in the government's objective of promoting and protecting the human rights of all Pakistani citizens.

HERE is a general belief that poverty and human rights cannot co-exist in the long run. So, Pakistan being part of south Asian area identified one of the poorest in the world, could not be expected to become ideal place where Human Rights conventions could be enforced into especially when socio-religious factors are also partly to be blamed for aggravating the situation.

The government of Pakistan People's Party, itself a victim of excesses of martial law and the ensuring civilian facade created by it, has been in the fore front of the forces that voiced their concern about the human rights issues.

Now that the party is in power there are signs already, that the issue is in safe hands, though they have to go a long way before things could be set right in many fields from child labour to women's status and to police excesses.

The first emphatic commitment of the government came at the recent world Human Rights Conference, by the leader of the Pakistan's official delegation to the conference, Begum Nusrat

MARTHA Alicia was overjoyed to find work as a maid in a high-class residential neighbourhood of San Salvador. A semi-literate peasant and single mother, she desperately needed a job. She was even more pleased when her new patrona (boss) said she could take her nine-month-old child, Jessica, along with her.

Less than six months later, Martha Alicia reluctantly returned to her village without the child. Jessica was up for "adoption" and would soon be on her way to Canada.

In subsequent police raid on two houses in San Salvador, following a tip-off from unidentified sources, they found five babies, among them tiny Jessica. Two of the children already had their adoptions papers signed and sealed in favour of Canadian parents and were about to be taken out of the country.

The couple who owned the houses — Martha Alicia's employers — were arrested and charged with child theft. According to police records, they admitted to having sold 20 children to foreign couples at around \$ 10,000 a time. The case triggered a series of police raids on other suspected "crib houses" located in different

neighbourhoods of San Salvador.

More than 18 babies have been taken into custody in recent months. Although many of the children had apparently legal adopting papers already made out to foreign couples, eight people were charged with a variety of offences related to child theft.

According to Dr Victoria Aviles, El Salvador's recently appointed Children's Ombudsman, highly profitable child trafficking is increasingly going on under the guise of legal adoption. She explained: "It is not a new problem but it's got worse over the past six years, and the victims are generally poor people."

Martha Alicia is a typical case. As a poor single mother she was powerless to stop her patrona stealing her baby. She told local reporters: "I said to my boss that I would not give

up my baby but they took her away and then sent me to work in another house."

When police arrested Martha Alicia's bosses, a Canadian couple had already paid more than \$4,000 for Jessica and were awaiting delivery. It seems that they believed that the child's mother was fully aware of what appeared to be a legal adoption.

According to official records, 135 Salvadorean children were adopted by foreign parents in the first six months of last year, only 15 less than in the whole of 1992. The official figures however, do not indicate how many of these children were given up by willing mothers, or how many were taken from them by force.

Felipa, a 20-year-old street seller, had her baby stolen. While recovering in the city's maternity hospital she had been befriended by a wealthy woman

who called herself Beatrice. When Felipa checked out of the hospital, Beatrice offered to buy the newborn baby for six thousand colones (around \$950).

Although Felipa refused, Beatrice insisted on visiting her at home during the next four months. Eventually she stopped coming. Three weeks later Felipa was tricked into handing over the child to a young man who said he would help sort out the baby's birth certificate.

Felipa immediately went to the police to denounce "Beatrice." When the authorities raided her house, they found three babies, four playpens, 20 bottles and 31 cans of powdered milk.

According to the nannies who worked for Beatrice (now in hiding in Guatemala or the United States), their boss had arranged at least four adoptions for English couples. Felipa's baby is believed to be among

them.

Edith Herrera, head of the government unit which supposedly supervises all adoptions, said that she has no water-tight method for detecting whether the cases are genuine. She explained that under Salvadorean law, neither the biological mother, nor the foreign adoptive parents are obliged to present themselves to the authorities. The lawyers can arrange most things through written consents from the parties.

It is clear from recent cases that when unable to obtain the mother's consent, lawyers simply put another woman's name on the child's birth certificate.

Dr Aviles explained that the loopholes in current laws are so wide that a child's identity can be changed in less than an hour at a town hall, paying a fine of under 10 US cents.

She does not dispute, however, that there are legitimate

cases for adoption, especially since 12 years of civil war in El Salvador have left a significant number of orphaned or unwanted children. Yet, for Dr Aviles, there is an urgent need to tighten up current laws with the principal aim of protecting the child's rights.

Her office has proposed a number of basic reforms in the law, including stricter controls on the issuing of passports to minors, a more detailed set of criteria for selecting and approving potential adoptive parents; and, most importantly, a follow-up procedure which ensures control over foreign parents who adopt Salvadorean children.

According to Dr Aviles, this is the area where most control is needed, since there is practically no control over what becomes of the children once they are handed over to the foreign adoptive parents.

The Salvadorean Catholic church recently denounced an increase in trafficking of vital organs, possibly extracted from children taken out of the country for adoption. There have also been stories, as yet uncorroborated, of organ trafficking from neighbouring Honduras and Guatemala.

— GEMINI NEWS

grammes are giving them a handsome profit. And many a poor people finding no other alternative, is taking the loan and handing over the entire amount of profit to the lenders. As a result the poor people are passing their days purely on loan money for years together. This indigent banking will not help alleviate poverty, rather it will make a poor man purely a dependent man.

The NGO's should charge actual cost of loan money from the borrowers and only the service charges. There should not be any profit motive. The NGO's are helping organisation and are not village money lenders. And it is expected the NGO's will consider the social aspect first as they have come with a big motive to serve the people.

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Vox populi

Sir, Our Information Minister recently said that the present democratic government believed in free flow of information in the country. "The present government is accountable and transparent" he said.

We feel that the present democratic government is better than previous governments. But unfortunately the present government does not appear to be discharging its duties and responsibilities with regard to accountability and transparency effectively and efficiently.

We find there is a big communication gap between the government, and the people. From time to time many important, critical, constructive and even adverse reports, editorials and letters are published in national dailies and weeklies pertaining to various government policies, activities, irregularities, negligence, lapses and omis-

sions but most of the time the relevant authorities simply maintain silence. This creates confusion and doubt in the minds of the people.

It may be mentioned here that our political leaders express their opinion and views on different matters and issues, they criticise or support the government by holding public meetings, press conferences, addressing Jatiya Sangsad or issuing press releases. But for the members of the public there is only one way to express their opinions, views, problems and difficulties publicly on personal matters, local, national or international affairs and that is only through the letters to the editor column of the newspaper and periodicals.

We strongly feel that the government is morally bound to go through each and every letter published in the national dailies, take necessary action, issue a clarification or rejoinder

as and when necessary.

If the members of the public go on writing letters in the letters to the editor column and the government offices and public sector corporations continuously keep sitting idle there is no justification for press freedom on the one hand and the government's claim of accountability and transparency on the other.

We would request our Minister for Information, Press Information Department, concerned government offices and public sector corporations to kindly take special note of the letters of the members of the public published in the newspapers and periodicals.

We strongly feel that the government is morally bound to go through each and every letter published in the national dailies, take necessary action, issue a clarification or rejoinder

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Deposit Pension Scheme

Sir, Deposit