

## Let's Make Democracy the Winner

With some justified satisfaction over the way the run-up to the city corporation elections passed off, we are emboldened to expect this morning that the act of voting and its immediate aftermath will bear a similar stamp of responsible collective conduct. The weeks of campaigning has been intense but trouble-free. The major political parties went to the very bottom of their reservoirs of energy, resources and creative flair, the last-named being in superabundance to drum the names of their candidates into the ears of the voters. Whatever over-enthusiasm was exhibited in the process came through vindicated in the end because tension seemed worked off thereby, rather than built up to a point from where it could turn ugly.

The major political parties—particularly the Awami League and the BNP—acquitted themselves admirably well. Their conduct has been impressive, breeding a new hope for live-and-let-live through future electioneering heat-waves. There was hardly any incident of tearing up posters or razing an opponent's camp to the ground. The way their party workers went about the trying business of campaigning, albeit under the directives issued from rival electioneering camps located in the closest proximity of each other, bore testimony to the percolatory words of restraint.

The Election Commissioner, from the very beginning, got seized of the issues relating to the maintenance of ethical conduct by the political parties in the fray. And the ground rules spelled out by him in consultation with the leaders of political parties psychologically circumscribed the candidates from committing any excesses. Unfortunately for him, the Bangladesh Bank report, published recently, did not back him up.

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So far so good. But the need for continuity of the same spirit can hardly be over-emphasised today. All that we have worked for during the weeks of campaigning may come to naught just because of some unforeseen slip-ups. The big parties can not be blind-folded to the possibility that in spite of their best intentions, overzealous workers at the grass-roots might send all the good work crumbling down to pieces. The party machinery should add to their customary warnings and exhortations by taking some special measures like, for example, grouping potential trouble-makers with the sober elements in their rank and file. They cannot afford to lower their guard even for a moment.

There are some distinct facets of extra-ordinary importance that these pourashava elections have come to acquire. The offices of the mayors and the ward commissioners are going to be elective for the first time. Second, the city corporation constituency is made up of a number of national constituencies for the election of MPs. Third, in a predominantly rural context of ours, metropolitan areas have a larger-than-life image for these set all kinds of behavioural standards for the rest of the country. Last but not least, the elections being held in the middle of an elected government's tenure, the results of the city corporation polls can be seen as a verdict on the performance of the ruling party and that of the opposition.

The stakes in the elections being so high reinforce the reason why the voters should come out in strength to cast their ballots in exercise of their democratic right of franchise. Their turnout should leave nothing in doubt.

With fairplay and a bit of luck may the best man win. But win or lose, if we can complete the process we will have paved the way for democracy to be the sure winner — there is no doubting that.

## Sound and Fury again?

So far, the conscientious objectors in the western world, to the terribly imperilled plight of the Bosnians, have been mostly individuals. But now the US Senate has lent its voice to the cause as an organisation.

The senate has passed a resolution imploring President Bill Clinton to lift the arms embargo against the government of Bosnia-Herzegovina. It is obviously non-binding on the US President who wields enormous powers in the field of foreign policy. One wonders very much why president Clinton has to be the one to be urged to withdraw the arms ban, when he had himself made a very convincing commitment to the electorate during his campaign that on assuming office he would move to lift the arms embargo against the Bosnian Muslims. He had then almost said what the US senate minority leader Bob Dole is now saying about policies that would "let the Bosnians, at the very least, defend their families and their homes." But this is too little too late; because what have the Bosnian Muslims got left after months of butchery and demolition work by the Serbs to really defend?

It has had some stirring of conscience but one has to wait and see whether the western military machine makes the purr and the long-awaited charge upon the Serbs. Whatever ripples we have otherwise seen in the placid diplomatic world have worked the wrong way for the victim while the accused has got away stronger with each whimper.

Going by the latest reports some belated military action seems to be in the offing. By all sights and sounds, it is going to be a NATO exercise in aid of the UN relief operations. So, the military intervention, if it at all comes to that, will have a limited mandate, having little or nothing to do with striking at the root of the trouble in the region.

US Secretary of State Warren Christopher has alerted the US allies in the NATO to prepare for military action to end the Serbian siege of Srebrenica and Tuzla. The NATO plans have been made known to the UN to be conveyed to its forces on the ground. The same old frame of mind comes gallingly through the mix-up between the military posture — wordy as it is — and the continuity of the talks that have wrecked a long ago. The negotiations have evidently floundered on the rock of Serbian refusal to give the Bosnians access to sea and return to them the lands seized by ethnic cleansing.

If by default the western influence has made the recalcitrant to act negatively surely the same can be reversed to make them behave positively now. Where there is a will there is a way.

# Bangladesh Bank Report: State of the Economy

*There can be no difference of opinion that increase in investment in different productive sectors is indispensable to generate income, employment and growth. Yet the rate of investment has been disappointing.*

RECENTLY I came across a report on the Chinese economy. According to the Chinese State Statistical Bureau, industrial output surged by an astonishing 23.6 percent over 1992. For those of us, who happen to live in the stagnant economy of Bangladesh, this is like a fairy tale. Given our grinding poverty and lacklustre record of progress it is hard for us to fully comprehend that such growth rates are even possible. Yet our Prime Minister said recently that a wave of development is sweeping across Bangladesh. I wish she would consult the actual statistics on growth and development before making such an unrealistic claim. If she had seen the pace of growth in East and Southeast Asia, which has doubled per capita incomes in a decade, she would have known what a wave of development looks like. The Finance Minister seems to recognise the government's failure in stimulating the economy but by turn he has been blaming the civil servants, engineers, bankers, the industrialists, labour unions and even the opposition for his failure to move the economy from its current slow moving mode. His remarks seem to suggest that it is the incompetence and other vices of these people which is responsible for all the ills of the economy.

The underlying assumption is that the quality of the government's economic management remains blameless. Unfortunately for him, the Bangladesh Bank report, published recently, did not back him up.

The Bangladesh Bank report does not give a picture of a surge of development sweeping the economy. Instead we get from this valuable document, reviewed in The Daily

Star of January 13, 1994 and other papers a picture of a near stagnant economy. The government is pleased that the rate of inflation has gone down. But the governor of our central bank has expressed unease instead of satisfaction at the implications of the current rate of deflation which is reported to be 0.3 per cent. Reviewing the Bank's report he said, "The deflation rate is a reflection of the overall sluggishness of the economy, as the demand for money has declined and government spending is not picking up, resulting in no money generation."

In other words, he does not regard this deflation as a sign of a robust and healthy economy. He expressed reservations about the deflation rate's accuracy, and validity. The package of goods and services for the consumer price index, introduced in 1972-73, gives, according to him, too high a weightage to food and thereby distorts the picture.

Actually the downward trend in food prices hides the price rise in other consumer goods. Despite the unmistakable evidence of sluggishness of the economy, the government is busy looking for signs of prosperity in every nook and corner of the economy. Instead of such propaganda gimmicks, let us look at the facts presented by the Bangladesh Bank report.

According to the report, the GDP growth rate in 1992-93 was 4.3 per cent. In the previous financial year it was 4.2 per cent. In other words, we have failed to attain even the most modest growth target of 5 per cent. If the popu-

lation growth is taken into account the picture is even more disheartening. The acceleration of the economy from 1991-92 to 92-93 is hardly noticeable. If we look at the growth performance of the dynamic economies of Asia our record is certainly very disappointing. Admittedly, even 4 per cent growth rate could be quite acceptable for a mature developed economy but a developing country cannot escape the poverty trap if it fails to move at a much faster rate. But the low growth rate is not our only problem. The

also failed to take effective steps to support the price of rice through procurement. The Bangladesh Bank is concerned at the situation. It knows that payment of remunerative prices for farm output is one of the ways in which the economy can be stimulated. Indeed it is a matter of common sense. In an economy dominated by the farm sector the demand for industrial goods and a variety of services depends on the health of the agricultural sector.

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During the remaining seven months, the final rate of implementation will be well below 60 per cent.

The government, I am sure, is keen on finding out the reason for this failure. Instead of looking for scapegoats it should look at itself. Has it been providing the kind of firm political leadership that is necessary to steer the economy towards greater discipline and efficiency? Red tape and administrative delays are well known; but today we have an additional factor of delays in decision-making at the highest level of the government. We are witnessing with dismay a virtual collapse of the administrative structure due to the escalating dispute between the different cadres. Has there been a bold initiative or any serious effort to resolve the dispute and assert the authority of the government? A responsible democratic government must take the difficult decisions necessary for good governance. It has the mandate and power to enforce its authority by force, if necessary. Instead, we are witnessing a passive government buffeted by the internecine quarrel between the different services of the state. Looking at the situation, there can be little doubt that the government is drifting. The economy of the country, as a result, is bearing the brunt of this failure of political will. Indeed the current economic malaise and near-chaos that prevails in the administration raises basic questions about the present government's competence. As elections loom voters have started asking some awkward questions about its record. The impatience of the people with delays and excuses is increasingly clear. The time for reckoning may have arrived.

cial activities with other sections of the community.

Rehabilitation is also an important aspect of leprosy control programme. It means that physical and mental restoration of the treated patients be ensured facilitating their normal activity, so that they may resume their position in the family, in society and in work places with dignity. Social organisations may come up with appropriate programme in rehabilitating leprosy patients. There is a need to supplement Govt. efforts in mitigating the sufferings of the people as well as towards accelerating national progress and social justice.

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## ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

downward trend of rates of growth in key sectors is another concern.

The overall weakening in economic activity is also manifested in developments in the electricity and gas sector where the rate of growth declined to 12.4 per cent in 1992-93 from 17.5 per cent in the previous year. In the agriculture sector, despite favourable weather conditions, the rate of growth has declined from 2.1 per cent to 2 per cent. One need not be surprised at this development. How can we expect farm production to grow if the farmers are unable to recover even the cost of their inputs? As expected under the circumstances, this has had a negative impact on the whole economy.

While all the subsidies on agricultural inputs have been withdrawn the government has

investment in different productive sectors is indispensable to generate income, employment and growth. Yet the rate of investment has been disappointing. The government is tireless in claiming on every possible occasion that the macro-economic indicators are favourable today. If so, what is stopping the entrepreneurs and investors from coming forward? In the last financial year a sum of 1074 crore was set aside for investment but actually only 719 crore were sanctioned.

In the current financial year the target has been set at 1700 crore but until last month only 500 crore has been sanctioned of which 368 crore has been disbursed. Small wonder that the picture is so bleak. Instead of a sincere attempt to identify the real reasons for this situation the government has been busy in finding scapegoats.

## Leprosy—a Major Public Health Problem

by Md Anowarul Islam Khan and Ms Manuara Begum

Today, January 30, is being observed as World Leprosy Day. Efforts are on to cure and prevent leprosy, a disease most dreaded socially, in many countries of the world, including Bangladesh. However, an optimum awareness towards social understanding of the disease itself and rehabilitation of the treated patients thereof, is the need of the hour.

INCIDENCE of communicable diseases poses a potential threat to socio-economic development of the country. A large number of people, including children and women, specially of low income stratum are being infected with different communicable diseases, and many of them dying everyday. In the disease-morbidity pattern we frequently experience a series of killers like diarrhoea, dysentery, typhoid, malaria, hepatitis, tuberculosis, filaria, measles, whooping cough, poliomyelitis, tetanus, kalaazar, leprosy, cancer, heart disease, diabetes and so forth. Nutritional deficiency and worm infestation have been considered as acute public health problems and in fact these are the leading factors for ill health and mortality of the poor. Incidence of disease and its consequences obviously affect socio-economic progress of the country. And leprosy is one of the most fearful diseases that seriously affect the activities of the infected person simply entailing a positive to his family and community.

Worldwide leprosy has been identified as a major public health problem. It is estimated that there are about 10 million leprosy patients all over the world of which Asia represents for 6 million, Africa 3.5 million and South Africa 0.5 million cases. And 6 million leprosy patients in Asia account for 60% of the total number of world leprosy patients. In this region, India alone, with about 4 million patients, has 66% of the total prevalent load in Asia.

In our country highest prevalence of leprosy is found in greater Rangpur and Dinajpur

districts. The epidemiology indicates that greater districts of Dhaka, Rajshahi, Mymensingh, Sylhet and Chittagong stand next in the peak order of prevalence. So far 100 thanas of the districts have been identified as endemic for leprosy. There are about 1.5 lac leprosy cases in different parts of the country of whom 20-25% are of infectious nature.

There exists a superstition that leprosy is a curse of God. But leprosy is just a communicable disease caused by a bacillus known as *mycobacterium leprae* infecting also healthy persons through skin and nose by prolonged and close contact with an infected person. The disease primarily affects the skin, mucous membrane and peripheral nerves. It also affects muscle, eyes, certain internal organs such as kidney, liver and adrenal and the male testicles.

### Clinical Manifestation and Consequences

Leprosy as we know is divided into two types — infectious and non-infectious. Many skin patches and nodules with symmetrical distribution on both sides of the body specially on earlobes and face are manifestations of infectious type of leprosy. The non-infectious type

is characterised by one or two skin patches with loss of or impaired sensation to touch, pain and temperature.

In acute stage, the patient loses strength of muscle and eye sight, has disarticulated fingers of hands and legs, develops general physical debility and even dies. Presumably, because of the manifest ugliness of advanced leprosy and the deformities it can cause, the disease is feared more than any other. A fear also, over the period, has grown that any leprosy is highly contagious and incurable, with the result that social ostracism is apparent everywhere which causes patients to conceal early lesions just at the time when it could be cured more rapidly. External manifestation of the disease results in loss of job, social security and status. The patients are rendered destitute and resort to beggars, in most cases.

### Control Programme

The government has undertaken leprosy control programme in the country. At the moment there are three Govt. managed leprosy hospitals one each in Dhaka, Sylhet and Nilphamari with a total bed strength of 130, to provide medicare services to the patients both outdoor and indoor.

In addition to that, international voluntary organisations run five leprosy hospitals one each in Nilphamari, Thakurgaon, Tangail, Moulvibazar and Chittagong having a total strength of 250 beds. The Govt. has extended facilities for diagnosis and treatment of leprosy patients in all the modernised hospitals, TB clinics, thana health complexes and union health sub-centres. Another 110 leprosy treatment centres are also in operation in rural areas.

### Prevention and Rehabilitation

The multiple consequences of leprosy call for creating a favourable environment for prevention of the menacing disease. Social awareness should be created through comprehensive health education campaign towards prevention and control of leprosy. The patients and their family should be informed and advised about regular treatment, repeated examination of contact, prevention of disabilities and protection of children. The people should be made aware that leprosy is not as contagious as other communicable diseases such as diarrhoea, tuberculosis, measles, diphtheria, tetanus etc. The

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cial activities with other sections of the community.

Rehabilitation is also an important aspect of leprosy control programme. It means that physical and mental restoration of the treated patients be ensured facilitating their normal activity, so that they may resume their position in the family, in society and in work places with dignity.

Social organisations may come up with appropriate programme in rehabilitating leprosy patients. There is a need to supplement Govt. efforts in mitigating the sufferings of the people as well as towards accelerating national progress and social justice.

Prevention and Rehabilitation

The government of Bangladesh has decided to close down the polythene shopping bag-industries very soon. However, some such industries may operate in the export processing zones manufacturing exclusively for export. The decision on the closure was taken sometime last year (1993). The time given to the industrialists is a few months only. But we all are to realize that sudden changes often tend to disastrous effects.

Questions arise what would the instruments of polybag industries be used for? Are they exportable items? How will the bank-loan matters of such industries be dealt with? Are we able to manufacture alternative, more-less equally advantageous, shopping bags just now? Answers to these questions are far from being satisfactory.

But polythene is not an unmixable blessing. Natural products of every kind are subject to natural degradation and recycling. Such natural degradation is otherwise called biodegradation. But a number of artificial products (i.e. factory-products) are semi-degradable and even non-degradable. Polythene goods fall in the latter group. Thus polythene is anti-environmental. This artificial product opposes the natural material and energy cycles. The uncollected polythene and plastic goods block the nutrient cycle of soil and also the water drainage system. Besides, some recent research reveals that the polythene and plastic goods have carcinogenic effects. Therefore polythene has caused so much concern in this era of environmental consciousness.

Scientists all over the world are busy in seeking some alternatives. Jute is such an alternative. Respected columnist S B Chaudhuri threw light on the matter recently (DS: 13-12-93). "It is thought that jute offers good prospects for supplanting polythene shopping bags" — he commented. It is known that an industrial complex including a jute pulp plant has been proposed to be set up in the country by a foreign firm. Cellophane paper from jute pulp may also be manufactured. By this time a type of biodegradable polythene has been prepared in Germany and polybag have been manufactured. This information has been supplied by H. Lechner, Director, German Cultural Centre, Dhaka (vide her letter, DS: 26-12-93).

From the above story it is revealed that corruption is a part of the society. It was, it is and it will be. But is limited among a few ones. Most people of the society, though they are not so influential and can only play an insignificant role, are honest and earn their livelihood through uncorrupt means. Hence the letter writer referred to has the cause to believe that the majority people would support him; only let him come out of the pseudonym and start the war by boldly uttering against the ill-doers.

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