

A Welcome Return Home

After spending eight long years in refugee camps in Tripura, India, the tribal people have started returning home. Although the vexing question of their full rehabilitation still remains, the return of 282 members of 77 tribal families — the first of many more batches to return — ought to be considered a major diplomatic success of the Bangladesh government. The Indian government should also be given full credit for allowing this remarkable development to take place. Twice was the official repatriation of the refugees thwarted — once on January 15, 1987 and again on June 8 last year, giving rise to all kinds of suspicion.

However, this time, everything seems to have gone according to the plan and nobody reneged out of his commitment. Thanks are specially due to Communications Minister Oli Ahmed for his unrelenting pursuance of the agreed formula and confidence-building task. There has been a lot of bickering over the tribal people's repatriation between India and Bangladesh. The other party — perhaps the main one — the Hill Tracts Refugee Welfare Association did equally play a crucial role this time in materialising the agreement reached among them. In the past however, mistrust and even hostility vitiated the whole atmosphere.

Although a political coup of sort, this is not expected to bring in the desired benefits if complementary measures have not been called in to back the present good work. The fact that after the completion of the repatriation of the first batch of tribal people, a monitoring committee will be visiting to note the progress of the returnees' rehabilitation and report back to the camps in India, shows that the first hurdle has so far been overcome. The real task still lies ahead. Enough time has been wasted on trading political rows on both sides of the border and neither side should be setting its mind on capitalising on other party's unintentional lapses. Even the Hill Tracts Refugees Association must take a softening stand and be understanding, for the job of rehabilitation is indeed gigantic.

The danger may still come from unsuspecting corners such as the number of refugees in the Indian camps. Already there have been wide differences between the figure given by the Indian side and that put forward by the Bangladesh authority. While the Indian estimate it to be around 60,000, the Bangladesh side thinks the number is in between 10,000 and 15,000. The agreements is bound to run into trouble over this issue unless taken care of in time.

If this point is amicably resolved, the more important issue of a long-term strategy for bringing a lasting peace in the hills have to be worked out. The tension and friction between the hill people and the plain-landers have to be defused through some radical and bold plans. The settlers and the indigenous people of the hills of late developed an untenable relationship between them, thanks to successive governments' wrong policies. There must be an end to these absurdly unrealistic policies and only then the tribal people will feel at home in the hills where they truly belong.

Back to Community

The Jatiyo Sangsad was told this week of a Tk 245.74 crore plan to construct, reconstruct and repair 3721 education institutions during this financial year. The Education Minister also informed the Jatiyo Sangsad that 3,958 new low-cost schools would be built in the year in places having no schools at all. The cost of these new schools are not covered by the Tk 245 crore plan.

The same day The Daily Star published the above, it also published a report from Sirajganj saying that nine lakh children were being deprived of education in the 16 northern districts plainly because they had no school to go to. Out of 23,494 villages in those districts, 11,365 have no primary schools. This piece of information would evoke a profusion of thoughts in any concerned mind. Going by this rate the remaining three-fourths of Bangladesh's districts can have another 27 lakh children in some 34,000 villages having no school to go. Even if the primaries in the other more fortunate villages are attended to the limit of their accommodation, can it be true that 83 per cent of all of Bangladesh's children go to school — as claimed by the government?

Can it be that in keeping with eleven thousand no school villages up there in the north, nationwide some 45 thousand-plus villages do not have a school? Then the first job for any government truly committed to literacy would be to set up one school in each of these villages. At the rate of building 4000 schools a year — as the government is going to do this year — we can hardly keep up with the new arrivals on the school-going-age scene which has already passed a million-and-a-half per annum.

This year's construction allocation of the above Tk 245.74 crore for a selected bunch of institutions underscores the maintenance costs of the school facilities. How much would it take the government to build 40,000 schools in a couple of years?

The best way to avoid these baffling questions is to recall sizes put forward by experts, and not controversial since, at The Daily Star Round Table on primary education. Recruitment of 150 thousand teachers was said to answer the need of catering literacy to a cent per cent enrollment of children. Facilities needed to accommodate this strength were said to cost Tk 20,000 crore. These computations need not be implausible. The government's present literacy and primary education approach says very forcefully that government would alone foot the whole bill. Which it cannot do even by some miracle. Why then persist in such an approach?

Literacy and primary education can still be salvaged but through only one way. And the society is crying for good sense to prevail on the policy-makers in this respect. Let the business of literacy be back to the community. This we say on the strength of the history of literacy of our nation — some centuries-old it is by now — and also on the strength of experience already gained by some development agencies taking special and large-scale steps in this sector. It has been found that society is not unresponsive to the small demands made on it in the interest of literacy — as so well demonstrated by the BRAC schools.

Community has to be involved in the literacy business not only to make it universal but also to make it meaningful — individually and socially.

AFTER repeated failures in the talks in Davos, Switzerland, in the week before last on implementation of Israel-PLO peace accord apparently made some progress. Chairman Arafat and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres tried to hammer out some of the major areas of the disputes. Peres said, "There had been many complicated problems. We were able to negotiate many of them — many be most of them". The most noticeable thing was the congenial atmosphere that prevailed during the meeting. Shimon Peres praised Arafat's cooperative approach on the most difficult areas of negotiations. Prime Minister Rabin also acknowledged that the meeting was able to work out a positive draft agreement on the implementation of the peace accord. It is obvious that any further delay will make Arafat's position worse.

Despite some progress in Davos meeting, subsequent remark by Peres that "implementing the declaration of principles could take as long as rest of this year" created uncertainty about this week's Cairo talks. Indeed at one stage Arafat declined to attend the meeting, the impression was that Shimon Peres does not have enough authority to negotiate. The reason for Peres's remark is however, obvious. Apparently, there are constant interferences by Israeli army generals in the peace talks led by Peres. Prime Minister Rabin declined to clear Davos text after his talks with army generals who insisted they have the final say on the security matters in the occupied territories. The General reportedly accused Peres of "eroding Israel's position on security matters in talks with Palestinians". Peres reportedly remarked that the army was "almost obsessive" on details. All these show why talks on implementation of the peace accord has been so difficult.

However, Chairman Arafat showed considerable accommodations as he realized that

Implementation of Israel-PLO Accord a must for Comprehensive M-E Peace

Bill Clinton's move to meet Assad appears timely as Assad is the key to a comprehensive M-E peace. Though Assad for his own interest did not condemn PLO-Israel accord outright, Palestinian factions opposed to the peace agreement were freely operating from Damascus; Assad did not stop them.

quick implementation of the present peace accord is absolutely necessary for maintaining credibility of PLO. Various reports show considerable loss of political image of Chairman Arafat and his Fatah group. This is not only because of political opposition of the Group of Hamas but also of non implementation of the peace accord. It is obvious that any further delay will make Arafat's position worse.

Thus despite uncertainty Chairman Arafat decided to attend Cairo talks. Here one can detect the important role of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak; he indeed played the mid-wife. Arafat met Mubarak before Cairo talks. Cairo talks succeeded in resolving two major issues — control of border crossings and size of Jericho. As it seems Arafat and Peres have shown flexibilities on both the issues. Arafat apparently crossed the border of his own negotiating arena on border-crossings issue; the decisions reportedly is — Israel and PLO will have joint control/supervision over border crossings though Israel seems to be the "senior partner" under Cairo agreement and will be able to stop Palestinians it considers suspicious and turn away any traveller who is not a West Bank or Gaza Strip resident." However, it was agreed that Israel will show "dignity" to incoming Palestinians. Probably in return, Peres became somewhat flexible on the size of Jericho — now the area would be about 55 sq kilometers.

As control of border crossings relates to sovereignty

which Israel has not handed over to PLO yet and would be negotiated only after 3-5 years, Arafat probably saw good in at least freeing somewhat bigger chunk of land from Israeli occupation. However, Arafat succeeded in having "Palestinian wing" in the border crossings with Palestinian flag flying which will serve the Palestinian residents. In any case, the most important is the early implementation of the Israel-PLO peace accord as this will undoubtedly lay the foundation

of the US' former security and foreign policies are largely influenced by the latter's policy decisions. Greatly encouraged by Washington's success in having Israel-PLO peace accord President Bill Clinton felt he should move ahead for a comprehensive M-E peace agreement which led him to go out of his way to meet the President of a state that is still in the terrorist list of the State Department.

Two Presidents met for a total of over five hours in two

of course, main condition is — Israel must pull out completely from Golan Heights. Israel also said it would pull out but "completely" was so far out of the question. Israel still fears possible shelling by enemies from Golan Heights — the heights that are of security and strategic importance to Israel. But there must be some ways to take care of that concern of Israel. Any peace should be based on normal relation with full diplomatic ties — something that has been working with Egypt and gradual Israeli pull out over an agreed period allowing time for confidence building. Stationing of UN forces at the rim of the Golan Heights for an agreed period before the final pull out could probably remove Israel's future concern.

Bill Clinton's move to meet Assad appears timely as Assad is the key to a comprehensive M-E peace. Though Assad for his own interest did not condemn PLO-Israel accord outright, Palestinian factions opposed to the peace agreement were freely operating from Damascus; Assad did not stop them.

There is no doubt that the summit opened up the possibility of a comprehensive solution of the M-E problems. President Clinton was happy on the outcome of the summit as he found President Assad very positive in his approach. Israel has also been looking for normal relationship with Syria — the major power in the Arab World. It was always insisting on the "normal" relation which it says should include open border, full diplomatic relations, open trade, etc. After years of ambivalence, Hafez Assad, this time, came out openly and clearly in favor of normalizing relation with

whether we like it or not. The majority of Australians evidently share my attitude."

In the opposing camp, Bruce Ruxton, a World War Two veteran, says many lives were sacrificed under the present flag, and that national security would be jeopardised by conversion to a republic.

"We just have to look at how republicans are faring," he says. "Dictatorships in some South American countries speak for themselves. Throw in the abysmal lack of human rights in the Chinese People's Republic and at the problems that struck India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and South Africa when they went their own way."

"If Australia becomes a republic and a president is voted in, what's there to say the next vote won't be to make that person president for life and to cancel all elections accordingly?"

GEMINI NEWS

Exchange rate: US\$1=A\$1.5

JEFF CURRAN is a freelance Australian journalist who specialises in veteran's affairs and tourism.

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

Muslehuddin Ahmad

of the future Palestinian state. The right of the Palestinian people to govern themselves was recognized by Israel in Washington peace accord and its implementation will legitimize this right on the ground. Thus some from of accommodation on the part of the PLO is indeed necessary with a view to achieving the final goal — the establishment of the Palestinian state. After Cairo agreement, Arafat reportedly said — Palestine is now in the map of Middle-East. In 1985 a very senior PLO member with the rank of ambassador told me that even if it is for a minute an independent Palestinian state must be declared and then it may decide to go for a confederation. He obviously meant confederation with Jordan which seems to be the widely held view.

Though Israel is not a state

summit sessions in Geneva of January 16, 1994 with the aim of charting a comprehensive peace for the Middle-East. Only future will tell whether the time spent — colossal for both the Presidents — were really worthwhile.

There is no doubt that the summit opened up the possibility of a comprehensive solution of the M-E problems. President Clinton was happy on the outcome of the summit as he found President Assad very positive in his approach.

Israel has also been looking for normal relationship with Syria — the major power in the Arab World. It was always insisting on the "normal" relation which it says should include open border, full diplomatic relations, open trade, etc. After years of ambivalence, Hafez Assad, this time, came out openly and clearly in favor of normalizing relation with

whether we like it or not. The majority of Australians evidently share my attitude."

In the opposing camp, Bruce Ruxton, a World War Two veteran, says many lives were sacrificed under the present flag, and that national security would be jeopardised by conversion to a republic.

"We just have to look at how republicans are faring," he says. "Dictatorships in some South American countries speak for themselves. Throw in the abysmal lack of human rights in the Chinese People's Republic and at the problems that struck India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and South Africa when they went their own way."

"If Australia becomes a republic and a president is voted in, what's there to say the next vote won't be to make that person president for life and to cancel all elections accordingly?"

GEMINI NEWS

Exchange rate: US\$1=A\$1.5

JEFF CURRAN is a freelance Australian journalist who specialises in veteran's affairs and tourism.

The Cost of a Flag — A\$50 Million

Jeff Curran writes from Sydney

Critics of Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating complain he is trying to steamroll Australia into republican status to make himself the first president. The debate on the country's political future has intensified with the Australian flag at the heart of the controversy.



Prime Minister Keating: Fliegging a change

Elizabeth II would be titled Queen of Australian.

The drive represents an about-face for the Labor Party on ties with Queen and Commonwealth. In 1973, following the victory that brought the party to power for the first time in 25 years, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam announced that henceforth

Says Keneally: "All reference to the British monarchy should be deleted from the Australian Constitution."

Under a republic, a president would replace the Governor-General. ARM members believe the president — or head of state — should be elected by a two-thirds majority of both the upper and lower

houses of Parliament. Keating's impatience to see the republic become a reality was seen when he asked Governor-General Bill Hayden not to end his current five-year term in February but to stay on as a caretaker pending Australia's disassociation from the British monarchy.

Australia's Liberal Party leaders, still smarting from election defeat, have refused to endorse the monarchy but stopped of backing moves for a republic.

Liberal leader John Hewson claims that "part of the aim for a republic is to weaken the power of the Senate and wipe out the Australian flag." He says the Liberals will adopt a "wait and see" attitude, expressing confidence in the constitution as it stands and calling for the government to spell out a case for change. The onus of proof for change, he says, must be on the Prime Minister.

Puzzling to most Australians

is why the government did not hold a referendum on the republican issue in the last election. A change to republican status needs a 75 per cent support vote.

In bars and homes and newspaper letters columns, the debate rages on. Journalist Ron Dunn is typical of republican supporters. He believes that Australia must break old ties. Dunn, 63, says it is past time that Australia stood on its own feet as a nation.

He says: "Any loyalties we had with Great Britain ended when they cut Australia and New Zealand loose and joined the EEC. Now it's our turn to forget them and face the fact that we're a part of Asia,

he had not been seen around, someone, somewhere, thought it fit to sack him. If the situation had not been utterly humiliating for the country, it would have been hilarious.

Yet as it stands today, the question which leaps to the mind of the innocent Dhakaite is, who is responsible for this? Is there to be no accountability for all this? Did we not elect into power human beings who at the end of the day, would be responsible for every action of theirs? At least those who were supposed to be executing at the tax payers' expense. Where did we all go wrong? But then, perhaps it will all be referred to an enquiry committee, and all will be well with the world!

But all is not well. The Dhakaite is just about fed up with things. Do we know yet how messages are sent to the other world when we happily address them to leaders of other countries, who have departed this world two years ago? Or are we mystic and there is a direct contact between the supreme beings and the other world? Now that would really be something, wouldn't it? Almost as funny as opening the newspapers and finding yourself sacked for being in the country, in Dhaka, to have the order quickly withdrawn the very next day. And with red faces all around, not the least being that of the Dhakaite, who wittingly or otherwise, always seems to be at the receiving end of the gross inefficiency of the regime. Please, if at some point, we do not hold those at the helm of affairs responsible for their acts, we might soon find our selves sliding backwards at such a fast pace, that it might well be impossible to find our feet. And stop sliding.

The authorities we have voted to power have opted to ignore the dizzying heights of work and go slushing around with a candour which does him proud. Not one person in the administration knows or knew, that the man occupying one of the highest positions in the country was actually diligently working away and burning the midnight oil. And because he had been burning the midnight oil, he had not been seen around and because

Syria's role in Lebanon is well-known and it is Syria which can effectively change situation in Lebanon including South Lebanon. But again the condition is — Israel must vacate the part of South Lebanon which is Israel's self-declared security zone. The activities of Iranian backed Hezbollah and other splinter Palestinian factions in Lebanon can not be restrained or stopped without a world from Iran and this can possibly be obtained by Hafez Al-Assad of Syria as he is practically the only leader in M-E who has meaningful relation with Iranian high command. Thus Hafez Al-Assad remains the key player in the M-E peace process and no comprehensive M-East peace is possible without his full participation. Once Israel agrees to pull out its forces over an agreed period from Golan Heights and restores its sovereignty to Syria the road will largely be clear for a comprehensive M-E peace.

In the light of the strategy for Middle-East peace set in Camp David accord, it is necessary to quickly implement the Israel-PLO accord for which the US must put necessary pressure on Israel including Israeli army. Though Israel has a democracy, it is headed by an ex-general who probably has the natural tendency to consult the army at every stage of negotiations. There is, however, nothing wrong in consulting army in relevant areas provided by James Baker, Clinton Administration has so far taken keen interest and played a very positive role (except out of proportion battering of Saddam) in the areas of M-E peace and it has so far worked well. In the interest of M-E peace continued US involvement is a must.

whether we like it or not. The majority of Australians evidently share my attitude."

In the opposing camp, Bruce Ruxton, a World War Two veteran, says many lives were sacrificed under the present flag, and that national security would be jeopardised by conversion to a republic.

"We just have to look at how republicans are faring," he says. "Dictatorships in some South American countries speak for themselves. Throw in the abysmal lack of human rights in the Chinese People's Republic and at the problems that struck India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and South Africa when they went their own way."

"If Australia becomes a republic and a president is voted in, what's there to say the next vote won't be to make that person president for life and to cancel all elections accordingly?"

GEMINI NEWS

Exchange rate: US\$1=A\$1.5

JEFF CURRAN is a freelance Australian journalist who specialises in veteran's affairs and tourism.

whether we like it or not. The majority of Australians evidently share my attitude."

In the opposing camp, Bruce Ruxton, a World War Two veteran, says many lives were sacrificed under the present flag, and that national security would be jeopardised by conversion to a republic.

"We just have to look at how republicans are faring," he says. "Dictatorships in some South American countries speak for themselves. Throw in the abysmal lack of human rights in the Chinese People's Republic and at the problems that struck India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and South Africa when they went their own way."