Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Monday, February 28, 1994

# A Dreaded Scenario

That the level of the city's ground water is rececling at an unprecedented rate should set the alarm bell ringing. The report prepared by PRC'BE, a newly formed news agency, and published elsewhere in this issue, has particularly highlighted the threat to high-rise buildings. The areas most threatened are Motijheel and Dhaka Cantonment where the level of ground water has dropped as much 16 feet and 15 feet respectively over the past five years. The ground-water level decline has been recorded at 2.30 feet annually in the city. If the trend continues, experts predict, the ground-water level will go down by another 20 feet in 10 years time. A most dreaded prospect no doubt.

Apart from the acute shortage of water - a problem already faced by the citizens of this metropolis - what looks so unavoidable is a largescale land-slide due to the sinking of land in the absence of water. Even a mild tremor will spell an unforeseen disaster in a situation like this. What will be its impacts on the overall environment of the city and its surrounding is not yet known. But one thing emerges clear — the city will perhaps no longer remain an attractive place to live in. If water is scarce and the threat of the earth under our feet giving in looms large, there is no reason why people will consider it a nice human habitat.

However, we must admit that the catastrophe facing us and when becomes real, will reasonably be called a man-made one. The way we are lifting ground waters shows hardly any respect for the laws of geo-physics. Our total reliance on ground water is based on a flawed premise. Whatever the experts may prescribe for solving our water crisis, we must give a second thought to the suggestion for extraction of more ground water.

The experts on the matter have identified the cause of the abnormal fall of the level of ground water. Dhaka City's soil structure has a 30-foot layer of subterranean slush not favourable for the rain waters to reach the aquifer below where in fact the water is stored. The water lifted by pumps is replenished by the process of rain water getting through. Known as recharging, this process is seriously hampered by the layer of mud beneath Dhaka. We are not aware if this problem of replenishing of the underground water can be solved by the help of any technology. But surely part of the solution lies in the very process of underground-water use. It is nothing other than leaving the water below alone where the problem is particularly acute and at other places lessening the reliance on it.

We are, however, aware that it is easier said than done. The need for water cannot be exaggerated and desperate people will continue to extract it from whatever sources they can lay their hands on without thinking about the consequences. There must be an alternative to the underground source. Here exactly our experts are also very clear about the measures to be taken to cope with the situation. Obviously, the emphasis is on the use of surface water. But the problem is that this water cannot be used directly for all domestic purposes. Water treatment plants are what can prove to be an answer to this problem.

The authority must shift its focus from the ground water to surface water and build up a few water treatment plants for Dhaka City. The money to be spent on this will spare the city of an eventuality likened to a doomsday scenario. Currently, WASA operates as many as 172 deep tubewells and lifts 71 crore 81 lakh 48 thousand 215 litre of water from below daily. Add to this the water large housing complexes lift by themselves and the nature of pressure on the ground water can be imagined. Such dependence on ground water has immediately to be lessened. Supply of surface water after treatment is the only alternative.

#### A Prudent Action in Russia

In a surprise but bold move for national reconciliation, the Russian Parliament granted amnesty to two of President Boris Yeltsin's bitterest enemies, former parliament chairman Ruslan Khasbulatov and former vice-president Alexander Rutskoi. They were both interned in Moscow's Lefortovo Jail, following the dramatic clash between the Russian Parliament led by these two men, and President Yeltsin. It is too early to judge as to what will be the long term effect of the brutal manner in which President Yeltsin brought the elected legislative body down to its knees. But there is no doubt that his action took the Russian people by surprise and shocked the world that so sincerely applauded Russia's transition to democracy. His action against the Russian parliament left a deep scar in the hearts and minds of the people and created a dangerous division among them.

It is in this tragic background that the decision of the parliament will have to be judged. It speaks of the wisdom and farsight of the newly, elected House that opted for the conciliatory route, and not the confrontation line that Yeltsin still apparently wants to pursue. The fact that the Russian President tried, till the very last moment, to subvert the amnesty move, does not speak highly of his political acumen. His action will no doubt linger the perception that what Yeltsin wants is to establish his unquestioned rule, and his professed attachment to democratic principles is acceptable as long as there is none to oppose him.

Yeltsin made a mistake by opposing the amnesty decision. His support to this move would have gained him some advantage from the positive fallout, and would perhaps have strengthened his reforms efforts with some new found support. The Russian President must realise that Khasbulatov and Rutskoi are not his enemies but his failure to push through the reforms are. It is his failure to spurt a growth trend in the Russian economy which is creating dissatisfaction and disillusionment. The dramatic rise of fascist forces — euphemistically called the ultra nationalists — is all due to the failure of the Yeltsin government to give the economy the necessary boost.

With the old superpower status gone, and Russia being only a shadow of its former imperial self, it is easy for political charlatans to appeal to sentiments of past glory and gain cheap, but dangerous, popularity. In his fight against this trend Yeltsin should try to bring as large a segment of the population to his side as he can. Steps should be taken to bring about more unity among the people, and not create further division.

In this respect the newly elected Russian Parliament has shown to be far more prudent than Mr. Yeltsin.

# Spring and the Renewal of Debate on Reforms

UR word for the spring season, Basanta, also stands for the pox. Not pax for peace but pox, the disease. The earth sprouts growth in profusion during the spring season. Pox portends a disease marked by skin eruptions. You can read some similarity there.

Our spring season spans the months of Falgun and Chaitra. In reality, the spring season is in evidence only during Falgun. The month of Chaitra marks its passage mostly as the harbinger of the summer season. Falgun is also called Fagun. There is a word fag in our vocabulary which stands for a red powder, much used for throwing at each other by those people in the subcontinent who indulge in the rev elry of the Holl festival Etymologically, the word fag does not seem to have to do anything with even Fagun. Then, the flaming red flowers like shimul and palash, which come to bloom at this time of the year, could remind you of agoon, the fire. Alas, etymology would not admit of such conjectures. The most you can do is to relegate all such thoughts

to the realm of poetic imagery Etymologically at least, the name of the month Falgun or Fagun, does not provide much of a clue as to the nature of the spring season. The fact, plain and simple, is that our months take their names from the stars in the constellation. By contrast, the names of the months in the Gregorian cal endar that span the season of spring, sound more earthly in import. Then again, for us spring is the last season of the year. For them, it is the first.

There are other points of difference too. Spring, the first and the freshest period of the year in the northern hemisphere, lasts longer - from March 21 to June 22. The first month of spring season.

N retrospect, 12 years

of Sikh militancy which

terrorised Punjab state

in north India seems a distant

which people today travel,

party and live carefree lives

makes it difficult to imagine

that till last year Sikh sepa-

ratists ruled the state through

terror, dictating even the so-

cial and moral conduct of ro-

Punjab's highways were empty.

its cities and villages deserted

after nightfall and anxiety writ

large on people's faces as they

lived in a lawless state and tal-

lied the daily body-count

which ultimately crossed the

17,000 mark, at times averag-

making up for lost time. And

now that the police have tri-

umphed over militants, local

folk are determined to enjoy a

flocking to cinemas, restau-

rants, pavement foodstalls and

liquor outlets, all banned un-

der the militants' moral rear-

latest film songs at weddings.

as once forbidden marriage

parties spill out dancing onto

the verge of closure and offer-

ing huge concessions have now

upped their tariffs and turn

away guests as Amritsar re-

gains its status as Punjab's

was in the late seventies," says

Lachman Das, a shopkeeper of

Hall Bazaar in the city centre.

"Safe, friendly and hospitable."

of bullet-proofing vehicles is in

the doldrums. Employees from

Even the lucrative business

"Amritsar is back to what it

most socially swinging city.

And hotels previously on

Raucous bands belt out the

The streets of Amritsar,

But today Punjabis are

For almost a decade

The complete abandon with

nightmare.

bust Punjabis.

ing 25 a day.

normal life.

mament code.

the streets.

It would perhaps sound presumptuous to call for publication of a White Paper on reforms annually at the time of the budget presentation. Yet, a complication on reforms, published at least annually, covering the entire gamut, would help the conscious citizen understand what it is all about and see the interrelations, how the components of the programme interact.

March, takes its name from Mars, the god of war. Some say that the naming of the month so, also suggests that the wars interrupted by the winter could be resumed. April's root is aperire. Latin for buds to open. May is named after Maia, the goddess of growth of plants. June comes from juvenis. Latin for 'youth'. The months thus proclaim spring to be the season for renewal and growth.

If not for anything else, the historic Ekushey February, a day that falls in Falgun, makes the season of spring as the time for renewal of the pledge to build a happy and prosperous nation, rooted in democracy. This year, the call went out for taking a fresh vow for achieving economic emancipation and for the establishment of an exploitation-free society In this, one can also read a call for reforms

As it happens, the ongo-

ing structural reforms came under assault in the early days of the spring season this year. It all started with the outcome of the municipal corporations' elections. The ruling party's fortunes suffered a reversal in the two major cities. It was the time for allocation of blames Fingers were pointed at the alleged hardships brought about by the reforms as the season for the voters' ires. Some of the arguments advanced in support of the accusations were really tenuous. For instance, it takes a bit of imagination to link the clearing the pavements of street-hawkers. to structural reforms. Without providing an alternate way of earning a livelihood to the

hawkers, the action rather re-

sembled a spring-cleaning at the highest of winter However, what had structural reforms anything to do with it? Is it a futile exercise anyway During mid-seventies, only about nine per cent of the total population lived in the urban areas. Now eighteen per cent of the swelling population are urban dwellers. You remove the street-hawkers and find them a place to carry on with their business. Soon enough there would be plenty of others to take on the places vacated by them on the pavements. The solution lies in creating opportunities for

working out? Perhaps areas like these needed closer attena juxtaposition of the spring season and the pox. Till some years back, a traveller from this country going abroad had to carry an internationally recognised health certificate of inoculation against small-pox. He does not need that any longer. We now live in a smallpox-free country. Should we not give some credit to reforms — the success of immu-

### our small blessings too. ALONG MY WAY

#### S B Chaudhuri

gainful employment and other economic activities in the rural areas and in making the countryside more livable. Lesser people would then trek towards the towns and cities in

search of a living. Of course, one can discern a linkage of the current programme of shedding public sector jobs, with the urban voters' disillusion. That is a phase of structural reforms alright. What about the safety net programme? It is not working smoothly? Reports keep coming in the newspapers that thousands of people have opted for voluntary retirement but are yet to get the promised compensation. Then there is the special credit programme for resettlement of people who have opted for voluntary retirement. How is the scheme

At the same time, the components of the health sector reform programme would seem to be proceeding at different speeds, the inter-linkages not very much in sight Life expectancy at birth in the decade of the seventies was 45 years. At the opening of the decade of the nineties, it has risen to 52 years. That still leaves us at nearly the bottom of the list even in South Asia. Life expectancy at birth is 71 years in Sri Lanka, 60 in India 59 in Pakistan, 53 in Nepal and 48 in Bhutan. Still, we have made some progress. At least, we are moving forward. However, hardly anything has been done for the increasing number of the aging population. In the mid-seventies.

there was one physician for

more than eleven thousand

I started this piece positing

nization programme in this

case? Perhaps we should count

people. At the start of the decade of the nineties, there is one physician for six thousand people. So we have more doctors than before. However, the availability of government hospital beds did not rise in the same proportion. In the midseventies, there was one hospital bed available for five thousand persons, at the opening of the current decade, it is for three thousand. Thanks partly to the reforms carried out in the import and tariff regimes, it has become easier for the private sector to open and run clinics and even hospitals. This has made up for some of the shortage in availability of hospital beds. However, private clinics are costly places for hospitalisation. Employment opportunities for young doctors also remain limited and many of them tend to seek greener pastures abroad. At times, the government had even put hurdles on their way out. May be that the \$665 million project being funded by

a symmetrical progress of reform in this sector. The health sector project is perhaps the largest single component in the ongoing reform programme. Barring the immediate circle of the policy makers, it is doubtful if others are fully aware of the dimensions of the programme. And, reforms cover a much broader spectrum. Health, education. agriculture, rural development finance, trade, industry, tariff, services, utilities, economic infrastructure, legal framework you name it — reform spans all of them. All these activities embrace the society as a

the Bangladesh Population and

Health Consortium will ensure

whole. It is a moot point if even the policy makers can see at a glance all that is happening around them. The ordinary citizen knows the least. Reforms have implications for all the strata of the society and the citizen has a right to be told fully about it all.

The traditional budget speech tells the citizens something of the events taking shape. However, these are only partial glimpses of the landscape, normally provided from a need-to-know perspective. It would perhaps sound presumptuous to call for publication of a White Paper on reforms annually at the time of the budget presentation. Yet, a complication on reforms, published at least annually, covering the entire gamut, would help the conscious citizen understand what it is all about and see the interrelations, how the components of the programme interact. He can then perhaps decide for himself if the reforms would improve the quality of his life or that of his progeny

The donors are calling for fuller participation of the people in the reforms process. How will the people get involved unless they know? Perhaps the donors also should help the authorities evolve appropriate strategies to communicate more effectively with the people and upgrade interaction among the policy makers themselves. Donors could even consider bringing out, in consultation with the authorities, treatise on reforms. The job is to tell all concerned where and how the reform is in progress, why the pangs of transition will bring benefits in the future.

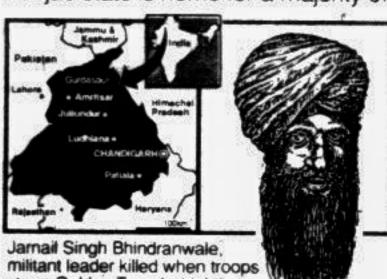
This spring's debate has brought the information lag on reforms to a sharper focus. It's time that the people are told more fully about the reform programme in its totality.

#### Terrorist Defeated — Now to Tackle the Police Rahul Bedi writes from Amritsar

Indian police say that they have smashed the terrorist campaign by militant Sikhs fighting for an independent homeland. Tough, take-no-prisoners policing, an end to political interference by New Delhi and terrorist excesses seem to have done the trick. But this onthe-spot report for Gemini News Service, on the second anniversary of return to civilian rule in Punjab, in February, warns that there is a price to be paid in the shape of a brutalised police force.

# War and peace in Punjab

Punjab state is home for a majority of India's 14m Sikhs



storm Golden Temple (right)

where fundamentalist the state's two bullet-proofing preacher Jarnai Singh outfits say normalcy over the Bhindranwale began his bloody battle for an independent Sikh past 14 months has sounded the death knell for the protechomeland of Khalistan, were once deserted after sundown. tion business. Today they are full of people

"When Sikh militancy was at its height," says an official from Delta Armours in Ludhiana, Punjab's largest industrial city 80 miles south of Amritsar, "we were hard pressed to execute orders." Today, he says. most of their assembly lines are fast reverting to routine

maintenance and repair work. For almost three years Delta Armours was India's single largest manufacturer of bulletproof vehicles, slapping protection onto around 200 police

cars and jeeps. Delta also "armed" some 50 bullet-proof tractors, perhaps the most effective weapon deployed against Sikh militants. Meanwhile, scores of

bunkers dotted around Amritsar are now empty, much to the delight of children playing hide-and-seek in and around them.

Instead, policemen carrying bamboo canes, not seen in Amritsar's walled city area for the past decade, were welcomed back by residents for "mundane" duties such as controlling traffic and investigating burglaries.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered

by Sikh bodyguards 1984

attack on Golden Temple; assassinated

Hardeep Singh Dhillon, Amritsar's senior superintendent of police, says the govérnment has issued instructions to concentrate on "normal" policing in view of Punjab's vastly improved law and order situation.

"We have to change the thinking of Punjab's policemen who look upon every offender as a militant and killer," says Dhillon.

Humour and irreverence. the hallmark of most Punjabis, depressed for years by ceaseless violence and bloodshed, are also back with a vengeance. Hilarious and bawdy tales about demands for Khalistan and the senseless behaviour of oncefeared militants are related

#### Narasimha Rao's non-interference in Punjab collectively

turned the tide against Sikh

Police say another crucial input was the abundant flow of information on the whereabouts of militants, without which the security forces and police could not have succeeded in ridding Punjab of

militancy. This primarily came about because of militants raping women in houses where they sought shelter.

While many Sikhs earlier sympathised with militants, indiscriminate rape following extortion and kidnapping turned sympathy into a desire for revenge in most rural households, say police officials.

Working in tandem, Kanwar Pal Singh Gill, Punjab's direc-The election of Beant Singh tor general of police, and Beant Singh had Sikh militants on the run. Helped by army soldiers and pursuing a policy ment of soldiers across Punjab of taking no prisoners, Gill and Prime Minister P V

had, by late 1993, reduced Punjab's daily body count to zero from a daily average of 20 a few months earlier. And by the end of the year Sikh militancy had been wiped out.

But there is a dangerous downside to Punjab's normalcy. The omnipotent powers given to the policy by Gill have already made them menacingly authoritarian.

Police excesses today are treated with casual callousness, dismissed as innocent casualties of any battle and counted merely as statistics eligible for compensation.

Satpal Dang, senior leader of the Communist Party of India, who has strongly open posed militancy since it surfaced and is perhaps the most respected politician in the state, says Punjab's police force has been totally brutalised in

its fight against militancy. "Avoidable excesses are not avoided," says Dang. The communist leader disagrees with Gill's assertion that a heavy price has to be paid to fight militancy and disciplinary action against the police merely

demoralises the force.

Instead, Dang cautions against not dismissing errant policemen who, he says, now flaunt their right to "rule" Punjab.

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#### OPINION

with great panache.

"We deserve this break,"

says businessman Ranjit

Mehra. "We thought this

nightmare of killing, extortion

and violence would never end.

in 1992 as Punjab's chief min-

ister after 67 months of inef

fectual federal rule, deploy-

## The World Needs to Rethink What it is Doing

How can this world be so strange? Don't the people who run this world have the slightest bit of sense in what they are doing? Don't they think that there is something more powerful than their guns and missiles and bombs? How feeble does not this military apparatus and its real effect appear, compared with the foods earlier this year in India and Bangladesh and Mississippi, and these days in Western Europe? And the bush fires in Australia? Should man start using the nuclear weapons in order to demonstrate how strong he is, after all? If hundreds of thousands of people can be driven out from their homes like cattle from their enclosures, like the Muslims in Bosnia, then why not toss an atom bomb in some unfriendly city just as well, as the destiny of people does not matter anything any way?

The world is a dialogue between the indisputable power of nature and the deeds of humanity. The great disaster is that too big a part of humanity does not believe that there is any dialogue. Many think that there are only the deeds of people in a world of a senseless nature which does not possess any specific intellect, mind or reason. They think that the human mind, although the brain of man can be made

material progress is not due to

Harry Blassar

dependence on chance only, or human skills only. But, unfortunately a number of people believe so; at least they are too hesitant to be convinced of the contrary.

And many who think that they have a strong enough belief as to how the world could be made a good place, they may be themselves unable to act in life in such a way that the good parts of life would be materialized.

How can this world ever be properly run and developed with righteousness, when events are being brought about as they are, as far as the deeds of humanity are concerned? How can one hope for nature's reciprocity, when humanity does not fulfil its own obligations in the dialogue? It is not the question of military conflicts only. There are matters of behaviour in all places and amongst so many people and in all countries, where righteousness, honesty and fair ness do not exist as they

Or, in other words, when will people realize that they are part of an exchange of ideas in the universe, with the postal code of "the Earth" as the address in the endlessness

And when will they realize silent in a fraction of time, is that they are the weaker party the guarantee and power for in the dialogue? When will it the existence of humanity. become clear that the deeds of They do not realize that the the weaker party do have a fact that humanity is given the greater significance than preopportunity for reproducing its sumed, with a view to what is specimens, and that the occa- in the power to act by the sion for the development of stronger party in the dialogue? Why has it been made so

difficult for humanity to understand this? Why does not the stronger party of the dialogue present itself and make it clear what it is all about? The reason is obvious. It is

because this stronger party is not a similar phenomenon as a human being. It is nature's power, with unrestricted and incontestable effect. It does not have a mouth to articulate human words. Therefore it must convey its messages through other means, signs and exploits.

People learnt to read these messages ages ago. But everybody was not convinced of them. At least they were not clear enough to all. And those who tried to clarify, were not trusted. People were suspicious, jealous, and moreover, often it suited them better not to have such convictions.

And as time went by, people forgot more and more of what at some time was quite clear to many. Although many still have a clear understanding, they are too few whose certainty is strong enough.

This is the problem. Therefore the world needs to wake up somehow. But when people are reminded of the seriousness of everyone's life and how it should be conducted? It does not take long, before they forget again. How could people have more faith in matters of responsibility and creditability and trustworthiness, as people view so many things relating to others with high suspicion? That is the problem number two

The author is the Honorary Consul General of Bangladesh in Finland

#### Muslim unity

Sir, Innocent people are being persecuted in Bosnia. They are fighting for their right to survive. Thousands have left the troublespot and have entered different countries as refugees. Those who did not leave Bosnia are fighting to keep their land from falling in the hands of the Serbs. The Bosnian Serbs are butchering numberless people there and they don't even think twice before taking the life of a

The silence of the super powers have shocked and horrified the entire world. Their indifference in solving the Bosnian crisis indicates that they only take prompt action to resolve any crisis which will eventually serve their own interests. But the most unfortunate fact is possibly the silence of the Muslim world. So much has been said about the Muslim unity, but now it shockingly appears that all this is merely lip-service. Their brothers in Bosnia are being eliminated systematically but they have

not taken any positive step to

put an end to this barbarism.

Instead of acting promptly and in a disciplined manner they are actually sitting by the sideline as mere spectators. As the UN has almost proved to be a failure, expecting too much from them is unwise. When it became evident that none is actually interested or bothered, the Muslims should have taken positive steps. They could have sent a strong combined force to Bosnia to stop this genocide. The Arabian countries like Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, can jolly well afford to send a wellequipped combined force to the war-torn Bosnia. The Muslim leaders could have forced the superpowers to act promptly.

But, it is most unfortunate and pathetic that the Muslim world remained rather silent. Bosnia has helped us to realise the bitter truth that there is hardly anything called Muslim unity. Realisation of this tragic fact has left the Muslims in a vulnerable position.

Today it's Bosnia, God knows which country will be the next. It is really ironical, now that we do not help fellow Muslims in dire needs, when one of the cardinal precepts of

the Holy Quran is unity and brotherhood. Towheed Feroze

New DOHS, Dhaka

#### Phoolan Devi

Sir, India's "bandit queen" Phoolan Devi has been recently released from the jail on parole. She has spent more than a decade behind the bars for the massacre of 22 men. She gunned down them to avenge her lover's murder and the crime committed upon her Ms. Devi born to a poor lowcaste farmer family whose land was stolen became a bandit to settle scores against uppercaste landlords who tormented the members of her caste.

It is sincerely expected that the social reformers in India will recommend appropriate social sanctions for implementation by the government so that the caste tension and clashes be removed from the Indian soil for ever and another Phoolan Devi may not have to take law into her own hands to stand against oppression and injustice.

M Zahidul Hague Asstt Prof. BAI, Dhaka