

From GATT to WTO

The cabinet has endorsed the package on a global trade accord hammered out in Geneva last December as a finale to the protracted Uruguay Round of negotiations held under the auspices of GATT — the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. The agreement for the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to replace the GATT has also received the cabinet's blessings. Bangladesh can now sign the accord at the gathering of the foreign and trade ministers in Marrakesh, Morocco, in mid-April.

Bangladesh holds only a minute share of the total global trade. Our commerce does not influence the course of world trade. However, staying away would spell isolation. Bangladesh often acts as the spokesman for the least developed countries. It is also to be noted that following the successful conclusion of the Uruguay Round, countries that stayed away from the GATT, are now lining up for its membership. All in all, it seems like a right move to sign the global trade accord.

Nor is it that by signing the agreement, Bangladesh would be required to undertake the onerous new obligations right away. As a least developed country, it would have time enough, to implement the key provisions of the global accord. Besides, by virtue of having undertaken economic reform programmes in hand earlier, Bangladesh is already way ahead of many a developing country in areas such as tariff reduction, removal of trade barriers and elimination of subsidies. In conforming to the market-access provisions of the accord, it would be in an advantageous situation as compared to most other countries in the region.

Nonetheless, to benefit from a more liberalised global trading environment, the economy has to increase its external competitiveness and grow more efficient. Otherwise, our exports will not share the expansion in world trade that the global accord is expected to bring about. Failure to do so might actually bring a reversal — our exports sliding down as our rivals in trade grow more competitive. Readymade garments provide a case in point. As the industrial nations phase out import quotas, our producers would find it difficult even to retain the existing market shares abroad unless their products grow more competitive.

The industrial nations are not going to dismantle the barriers to trade they have built up against exports from the low-cost producers in developing countries. Unilateral retaliatory trade measures would probably be continued to be applied by them to keep the products from the emerging economies out of their markets. However, countries hurt by such measures would henceforth be able to take their case to the WTO — the new world body for settling international trade disputes. Smaller countries should remain particularly alert so that the WTO's mandate for settling trade dispute is not impaired in any way to make it less effective.

Developing countries had been wary of inclusion of an environmental code for world trade in the global accord. Latest indications are that they have, by and large, reconciled themselves to the idea. A sustainable environment is their goal too. The problem lies in making transition in matter of years to a stage, which took the West decades to reach. However, in late March, the industrial nations agreed on the restructuring of the Global Environment Facility (GEF), pledging a two billion dollar fund to help developing countries protect the environment. So, there is some compensation too for the poorer nations.

Developing countries are also wary of the move by the industrial nations to write a code on global labour standards into the world trading rules. Some of the proponents of the move in the West argue that goods from the developing countries should bear special tariffs to erode the advantage they get from low level of wages. Most developing countries see in this move another ruse to keep their low-cost products out. The GATT chief, Peter Sutherland, warned the other day, against such efforts to limit trade with developing countries on the ground of their having lower labour standards. This indeed is an area, where one needs to tread with extreme caution.

Dealing with Fatwas

Fatwas, a kind of self-proclaimed religious sanctions, seem to be eating into the very vital of rural societies in some areas of the country. Half literate, these agents of religion have been busy campaigning against educational, health, rural development, tree plantation and other such programmes carried on by different Non-Government Organisations (now renamed Private Voluntary Development Organisations). So aggressive are these religious zealots that they are already credited with the infamous act of burning down quite a number of schools run by Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) in different districts and have managed to interfere with other programmes of some of the NGOs.

A report carried in a vernacular daily says that the leading fatwa pronouncers, who caused incalculable harm before being forced to go in hiding, are back again in the areas of their work in the district of Bogra. This time they are not campaigning publicly but actually making up for it by vigorously pursuing their clandestine activities to give the impression that they have just begun where they left. In a village called Kahalu, three tuberculosis patients died because they were not allowed to receive the treatment BRAC was dispensing for them at its health centre. Another six attacked with the same disease, have been forced to become terminally ill because of the same virulent campaign against BRAC.

Add to this the other social sanctions the fatwawallas are imposing on the most productive section of the population. The 10 women who were divorced by their husbands, thanks to the fatwas unjustly delivered, have not yet been accepted by their families and the 60 families in the fatwa-infested area boycotted have not been permitted to speak to their neighbours. The list need not be made long to get the picture of the intimidation and repressions common, simple people are subjected to.

What is important is that the fatwamen are in reality challenging the very basis of our modern legal system. They are bent on undoing all the good works done so far to empower the poor people. It is exactly at this point, their blow hurts most. The local administration has not been quite unmindful to the development but neither has it done enough to defeat forces that are against people's well-being and the country's progress.

JAHANGIRNAGAR appears to be ready for reopening after the latest closure but the prevailing mood on the campus is one of apprehension. With the DUCSU elections announced, the university is hoping for the best and preparing for the worst. Elsewhere, in a number of institutions of higher learning, a dark cloud hangs low as memories of past strife and the fear of impending ones take away all sense of peace and tranquillity one normally expects in a seat of learning. Matters, far from improving, have remained as bad as they ever were. Where lies the problem, is the question every one is asking. So long the situation remains as bad as it is, there will be no end to our queries, in our desperate search for a formula that will lead to a solution of this intractable problem.

In our enquiries into the source of the problem we have often avoided the real issues. A glaring example is the report of the committee set up by the government on the issue of violence on university campuses. The measures suggested are all remedial, without the faintest suggestion that, along with others, the government, too, is to blame. No body expected the committee to tell this home-truth. But this will bear repetition since this is the one truth which has to be faced if we are really concerned with higher education in this country being saved from total collapse.

I would thank Mr Abdus Sobhan for his remarks (Daily Star, March 11) on my column 'Choosing a Vice-Chancellor' (Star, March 1). I find a common ground between two of us when the 'ills of the universities' are in question. We differ, and the difference is fundamental, on the roots of the ills. He thinks my views partial when I identify the government as mainly responsible for the ills. He, on the other hand, would exonerate the government from any ill doing or ill intentions, and would lay the blame for politicising the universities with all its evil consequences, on the teachers, and ultimately on the 1973 Acts/Order, particularly the clauses providing for elections. There is no doubt that university politics revolve mainly round the Senate's panel elections. In the sixties, the Heads of Departments nominated on the basis of seniority by the Vice-Chancellors (themselves chosen directly by the governor in his capacity as Chancellor), drew the democratic ire of a section of the teachers, because Heads were influential. The framers of the Act/Order made this office rotative. The office has since virtually lost all its academic weight. No modification or refinement of a blind principle was ever attempted. The same has happened, to some extent, in the case of elected Deans of Faculties. In neither case is seniority and academic standing a factor any more. Most importantly, under the provisions of the 1973 Act, the Vice-Chancellor's office has suffered the same fate. Mr Sobhan sees Gresham's Law (bad money driving good money out of circulation) in operation in the process of choosing a Vice-Chancellor. I could not agree more with him when he says this. But then, what is his remedy? Change the Act, remove the panel elections, and make way for distinguished scholars like Dr Mahmud Hossain to come and hold the reins of our universities.

I would ask Mr Sobhan to read the authentic story of how Governor Moniem Khan got rid of Dr Mahmud Hossain (the di-

rective had come from Islamabad); the hectic midnight parleys to pre-empt a feared High Court injunction, should Dr Hossain challenge the legality of an unprecedented order of dismissal, and how, thanks to Lal Mia's intervention, the dismissal order was changed into a letter of resignation, supposedly voluntary but in fact given under pressure. The story has been narrated in detail by Mr Borhanuddin Ahmad in his 'The Generals of Pakistan and Bangladesh, Chapter 11.

I mention this to show how politics at the state level can and does impinge on university matters, and how incompatible the two things are: debased politics at the national level and academic purity at the universities. Any body with some knowledge of history will be on his guards when a highly politicised government promises to set matters right on the campus through a directly appointed Vice-Chancellor.

Mr Sobhan seems to have equated both the Senate (with a substantial — roughly one-third — teacher representation) and the Syndicate (where teachers often have an effective majority, for which they are not to blame) with teachers (not to blame) with teachers. This is numerically wrong. But here, I would concede that there is scope for amendments, if the object is to have a Syndicate less partisan, less obligated to a constituency with its ever-present pressure, and more secure from undue pressures, and therefore able to function as a judicial body. The difficulty with our democratic Syndicates is that it is both bar and bench merged into one.

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I see the only way of weaning the politically oriented teachers — not all teachers belong to that category — away from nonacademic even anti-academic activities is to ensure that the government, also the political parties, do not meddle in university matters, do not attempt to influence elections, do not look upon universities as citadels of power. I have argued this point more specifically in my column 'Keep off this Green Lawn' (Star, September 15, 1992). Teacher involvement in panel elections and similar activities is linked with government manoeuvres in respect of universities, its desperation to find agents among teachers and students. Politics here follows the law of filtration, from ministers and politicians to the faculty and the student body. No, there is no way of exonerating the government from the charge of undue interference in what concerns only the universities.

PASSING CLOUDS Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

I am glad that Mr Sobhan has had to admit that in choosing Vice-Chancellors, the government cannot claim to have picked up superior/better candidates. But to ascribe the lowering of standards by the government to the example set by 'panelwallas' and thus to justify 'mediocre choices in the non-Act universities', is poor logic. It hardly strengthens his case for reverting to the older system.

One basic principle of choosing a Vice-Chancellor is the principle of acceptability without sacrificing the principle of eligibility. The Rotary Clubs do it in their own way, in their search for the next District Governor. A rigorous search is carried out in many

American and some Commonwealth country universities for the next incumbent when a sitting Vice-Chancellor is in the last year of his office. If we have to think of better alternatives to the system we have now, we should be looking around, rather than doing something which will amount to, in my consideration, flying from frying pan into the fire.

The search principle followed by many universities in the West is too abstract, too high principle for our political guardians here to find a ready acceptance. In principle and according to the spirit of the Acts/Order, the guardianship role belongs to the Senate but the government will not leave it at that. Because it does not trust the Senate, it must emasculate it. Because there is a headache, it must smash the head. This is the political wisdom it has learnt from Pakistan. The search principle implies an understanding of what democratic distancing by the government is, an understanding of how self-governing institutions are managed. But I dare not propose its immediate adoption. I would only ask the policy-makers of our political parties to ponder over the several alternatives, the options available to us, the systems found by others in choosing their Vice-Chancellors that have proved satisfactory. It is not necessary either to give all our universities one fixed, inflexible system. What is good for Dhaka, may not be good for Jahangirnagar. An outsider as a Vice-Chancellor may be a matter of choice for one, may be the only choice for the other.

Finally, let us not be shy of politics, so long these are on sound lines, and positive in intent. The more developed a society is, the more political it will be. There are plenty of politics in the best of world's universities. At Oxford, even some professorial positions are elective: all resident MAs can cast their votes in choosing a professor. Choosing the head of a college is hot politics but not so when it comes to choosing a Vice-Chancellor. — a mere matter of rotation among Heads of Colleges. At one time, cardinals resorted to the ugliest and bloodiest of politics in choosing a Pope; today, they still elect a Pope but the process has been cleansed beyond recognition.

The principle of selection obtaining at the central government universities of India eschews election at any level. A selection committee is formed consisting of members who must not have any connection with the university concerned. The committee suggests a panel of three, drawn usually from other universities. This ensures that the person finally selected will come without any bias toward any group or faction. The final choice of course lies with the Chancellor.

I hope I have given a correct description of the system. As far as I know, it has worked well; it cuts at the root of teacher politics. It further ensures that there is no politics at the higher level, outside the university. POST-SCRIPT: A word about the book 'The generals of Pakistan and Bangladesh'. I hope to write on this very stimulating book one of these days. Published by Vikash, India, with marketing arrangements with a local publishing house: Airport Customs, for reasons best known to them, have stopped a consignment from being released. And this has gone on for over a year now, in a country which is no longer ruled by a General. But you can still have your copy if you know which bookshops to go to.

Benazir Battling Male Prejudice

by Claudia Craig

BENAZIR Bhutto has fought many battles in her young life. She fought a military dictatorship for eleven years frequently suffering imprisonment, including solitary confinement. She saw a dearly loved father hanged and a favourite brother poisoned to death. She had to spend many years in exile constantly hounded by Zia's intelligence agencies. All of this could neither break her spirit nor weaken her resolve.

The struggle for her did not end with Zia's death. Having become Prime Minister of Pakistan through a free election in 1988, she had to contend with Zia's men entrenched in all the major institutions of the state. The transition from military to civilian rule is always difficult because the old order does not vanish with the dictators death. As Haiti's example so clearly demonstrates, oligarchies created by dictatorships fiercely resist real change, particularly democratic change. Real democracy threatens to expose and punish and therefore has to be resisted. Such was the situation in Pakistan.

A classical destabilising operation was unleashed in 1989 against the Pakistan People's Party government. Benazir's reputation was deliberately sullied and her husband painted black. When a vote of no confidence in November 1989 did not succeed she was dismissed by the President in August 1990 using powers inserted by Zia in the constitution. Another saga of trials,

imprisonment, and victimization began for Benazir Bhutto. Elections held in 1990 were rigged against her and the Pakistan People's Party. Her husband was jailed on



Benazir Bhutto

flimsy charges and she was dragged from court room to court room all over the country on trumped up charges of corruption. None of the charges against her or her husband have stood up to judicial scrutiny and they have been acquitted in all cases decided so far. While these struggles were imposed upon her either because she was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's daughter or a democrat who refused to counte-

nance dictatorship and repression, her gender has led to other battles both in the political domain and within her own family.

Conservative political forces such as the clergy and the obscurantists have always had a negligible political appeal in Pakistan. They have lost every election ever held in the country and seem to be loosing rather than gaining ground at the hustings. However, their lack of broad based political support does not deter them from acting as a strong pressure group. Organised into tightly knit minor parties with militant student wings, their power exceeds their numbers. This right wing coalition has always attacked Benazir for her gender. It does not matter to them what her views are on the issues. She could be a devout muslim or a left wing radical, they fight her just because she is a woman in public life. In their view of the world, which does not correspond to Islam's, a woman's place is at home and not in the political domain. The bogey of whether a woman can be a leader in Islam is raised every few years. Long bearded clerics in somber tones pronounce fatwas or religious edicts against women but their real target is Benazir. They cannot countenance her

as a leader of the country or even of a political party.

This attitude of the clerics plays well in a country where a woman is often considered to have a lower social status than the male. Male chauvinism manifest itself in many forms particularly in the privacy of a home. However, it is in the public domain that the problem becomes acute. Apart from a whispering campaign of half truths and rumors, quite often sexist innuendos are used to denigrate a women leader. To emerge as a preeminent political leader in such an environment is not mean achievement for a woman. It is to Benazir's credit that she has transcended the limitations of these peculiar set of values and attitudes. She has fought the conservatives and the clergy and has cut a trail that makes it easier for other women to challenge this hitherto exclusive male preserve.

The recent attacks on Benazir from members of her own family stem essentially from a similar mind set. Her mother unfortunately shares the retrogressive values of a feudal society. She believes that her son Murtaza is the only true heir of his fathers political legacy because HE IS A MALE. Begum Bhutto, Benazir's mother, publicly uses a sexist justification to pro-

mote her son's political interests. In her mind, the mere fact that Murtaza is the male heir, is enough of a justification for him to lead the Pakistan People's Party. What she forgets is that it was Benazir who stayed in Pakistan to fight martial law when other members of her family left the country. For seven long years, from 1977 to 1984, she was the one who kept the banner of the struggle aloft, she was the one to be jailed, harassed and victimized.

Benazir is a leader of the Pakistan People's Party not only because she is Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's daughter. She has won her spurs in the heat of the battle against tyranny and dictatorship. To use a feudal argument of primogeniture — inheritance going to the male heir — devalues the struggle of millions of Pakistani's who followed Benazir during extremely difficult times. Such an argument reduces the members of the Pakistan People's Party into feudal retainers rather than thinking men and women who are in the party because of its vision of a liberal, democratic Pakistan. It also plays into the hands of her party's political opponents who charge her party's leadership to be dynastic. The feudal mind set which is the guiding spirit of Begum Nusrat's campaign, also translates into attacks on the husband of the female child. Many of the old Sindh families never marry their daughters. Besides satisfying some ancient notion of male honour, it is a convenient tool to keep the inheritance only among the males. Benazir marriage to Asif Ali Zardari is inconenient from a feudal perspective. Her husband symbolises the other, the alien, for her family members and therefore has to be targeted. Again, this peculiar mind set does not take into account Asif's contribution to Benazir's politics. Besides providing companionship and support to a woman leader in a male dominated society, he has been an integral part of the political struggle that Benazir waged over the last three years. For his pains he had suffer two and half years of rigorous imprisonment. Twice elected a member of the National Assembly from a constituency in Sindh, he is widely recognized as a political strategist and troubleshooter for the Prime Minister. There is a partnership as effective as Bill and Hillary Clintons, but quite unique in a third world setting.

Benazir's struggles against dictatorship and entrenched oligarchies are enough to qualify her as a preeminent champion of human rights in underdeveloped societies. What distinguishes her contribution from some others is the social limitations of gender that she has overcome in a male dominated society. Conflicts within her family indicate that her battles are not yet over.

To the Editor

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

PM's Japan visit and Jamuna Bridge

Sir, Prime Minister Begum Khaleida Zia is visiting Japan from March 28 to April 1 to finalise the negotiation leading to the agreement between Japan and Bangladesh over 200 million dollar credit for Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge. We wish her mission all success. We, the people of North Bengal are shocked to learn that proposed bridge has a provision of laying metre gauge railway tracks. Provision of metre gauge railway tracks over the bridge will deprive Rajshahi and Khulna divisions forever of direct, without change changeover, and smooth, speedy as well as economical railway connection with the capital Dhaka and vice versa. The western region consisting of Rajshahi and Khulna divisions has two different railway systems with 85 pc as broad gauge and the balance only 15 pc as metre gauge. Although out of total 1700 miles railway tracks in our country, 1300 miles are metre gauge and 400 miles are broad gauge and that in western region only, yet in 1969 United Kingdom's Freeman Fox and Partners and in 1973 Japan's Japan International Co-opera-

tion Agency, in their survey reports, recommended for broad gauge railway track on the proposed bridge to connect Dhaka directly with 85 pc of the western region and the country's single natural port the Mongla without any interruption and change over. In the western region, almost all jute mills, sugar mills, news print mills, large scale industries, rich agricultural lands, unexplored deposit sites of mineral resources are connected by broad gauge railway track. The changeover from broad gauge to metre gauge and vice versa will always make the journey and movement of goods troublesome, risky, time consuming and costly. Although the railroute is more lengthy than landroute, direct train journey between Dhaka and Chittagong is always preferred and it ensures earlier arrival than by bus.

Besides, for marketing its produce the whole western region is dependent on Dhaka. In near future cargo and passenger traffics are bound to be heavier restricted to heavier transport. Now-a-days, all over the world, metre gauge railway is being replaced by broad gauge. Recently prime minister of India Mr. Narasimha Rao has decided to replace within 8/10 years the metre gauge

portion of railway tracks in India including that in all our neighbouring Indian provinces by broad gauge railway tracks. In our country 60 wagons of a goods train cost only one gallon of oil for one mile. For the same weight of goods, as carried by 60 wagons, 240 trucks are needed. 240 trucks need 21 gallons oil as fuel for one mile only. And this benefit will be more achieved, specially in the western zone, when the Jamuna Bridge comes up with broad gauge railway track.

But once the breadth of the bridge is fixed and constructed, in future it will not be possible to install the broad gauge railway track. The installation of broad gauge railway tracks now needs to be thought over. To link Dhaka with the Bridge, the link 100 miles broad gauge railway track from Daria in Tangail district to Dhaka, Narayanganj, if possible via Savar, only needs to be constructed. Only the broad gauge railway tracks can have provisions for turning it into the mixed gauge railway tracks. Mixed gauge railway tracks at present exist between Parbatipur and Saidpur to facilitate the transportation of rolling stocks, engines of both broad and metre gauges to Saidpur Railway Workshop.

Since the government of Japan is one of the co-financers of the Bridge and Japan International Co-operation Agency in the survey report recommended for broad gauge railway track on the Bridge, Prime Minister Begum Khaleida Zia and her Government are undoubtedly on the favourable position to press for

replacing the provision of metre gauge railway tracks by broad gauge railway track over the Bridge.

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Palestinians, the betrayed and the crucified

Sir, By the sheer brutality and brazenness of its occurrence, the unprovoked blood-bath at Hebron amply justifies the long-standing Palestinian uprising or the Intifada. How else the Palestinian anger and anguish can have any recognition? Is there any other way than resorting to a hate mission counter to the missions of the occupation force? Atrocities committed thus far have had tremendous impact on the psyche of the tormented. The worst fear of the peacemaking processes to be ditched has been alarmingly accentuated by the overwhelming sense of betrayal.

While that ground-shaking Israeli-Palestinian Peace Accord signed on September 13, 1993, embodying the notion of mutual recognition and Palestinian self-determination phase by phase, has been shattered into nothingness by the Israeli zealots' free licence to shoot worshippers inside a mosque, the Israeli authorities in effect have established themselves as either the perpetrators per se or the unassertive peace-makers, the unwieldy gendarmes who just

have become the deaf-mute spectators of the mayhem. Before the pacifists' overtures for continuation in peace talks hold ground again, it has to be realized that mere apologies forwarded to the Palestinians or reiterating the promises to stop the hoodlumery and announcing a hefty sum as compensations may not have any lasting effect. It must be agreed upon that sixty-nine deadmen, whether Israeli or Palestinian, are sixty-nine individuals gunned down as per the demonic schemes of the zealots/the extremists. And, one must not equate one Israeli corpse to one hundred Palestinian corpses. Those killed must be regarded as martyrs. Again, nobody perhaps can console those who are left with the dead bodies. Queer though, the suppression of Palestinians is usually highlighted as Arab-Israeli conflict. Whereas Arabs other than Palestinians are not suffering an loss/subjugation other than having to surrender a piece of their land annexed by Israelis: the Palestinians live like pariahs in their own homeland. They are the tormented ones, the betrayed and crucified ones. As the Palestinians in the holy land are denied their rights to hold procession on the eve of the holy Palm Sunday before the Easter Sunday, as they are not provided the minimum security of offering prayers in peace inside mosque, nobody should expect toning down in the Palestinian protest or turn back from movements and demonstrations. Disconcer-

Hubert Francis Sarkar Singhtola, Dhaka