

PLO-Israeli Accord

What two die-hard enemies, that too constantly mindful of the sensibilities of their respective constituencies, can do to reconcile some of their differences, has been amply demonstrated by Arafat and Rabin in Cairo on Wednesday. They signed the much-awaited accord for effecting limited Palestinian self-rule in the Gaza strip and Jericho after the Israeli troops have pulled out from there in three weeks' time.

Despite the last year's Washington accord, signed by the PLO and Israel amidst great fanfare, the frequently on-and-off Middle East peace process had remained stuck with the very rudimentary question of limited Palestinian control on some of the Israeli-occupied lands. In fact, the atmospheres changed from the worse to the worst early this year with the massacre inside a mosque on the West Bank which patently confirmed the Palestinian complaints of insecurity perpetrated by the Jewish militants under an Israeli administration. It looked at that time that all channels of communication between the PLO and Israel had slammed shut beyond redemption. From this point of view alone, the resumption of negotiations and the eventual signing of the accord represent a sea-change no doubt.

But the establishment of Palestinian authority in the previously occupied areas has to be regarded as a very small first step towards wider Palestinian autonomy which in turn should lead to the much-desired creation of a Palestinian homeland over a larger landmass, held by the Israelis. It is noteworthy that the crucial negotiations on the final status of the whole of West Bank and Gaza are to begin not immediately but rather locally within two years. Since the basic contention between the two sides remains the onus lie on the sponsors of the accord as well as Tel Aviv itself not to regard the limited Palestinian self-rule as something of a probation for the Palestinians. This is more so, because Israel will retain considerable power in the occupied territories, particularly over the Jewish settlements. How narrowly-based the Palestinian control could be is indicated by the fact that they would not manage external security and foreign relations.

The seeds, therefore, are embedded even in the post accord situation to imperil or set back the peace process once again. Add to this the opponents of the pact on both sides. However, a hope-giving sign is discerned in the convergence of opinions the USA, Russia and front line Arab States have manifested on taking the peace process forward. Obviously they cannot be the sole guarantors of peace that basically lies in the hands of the parties to keep. Only that the sponsors can aid the process immeasurably by remaining not only neutral but also fair. Besides, the Palestinian self rule will give them the precious opportunity to raise their standard of living, which has fallen terribly with the international assistance that is bound to flow to them.

It is only natural for such a complicated peace process to envisage a phase-by-phase approach leading to a final settlement of the independence and homeland issues, confronting the embattled Palestinian people. But at no point in time should it be made to appear as if any forced co-existence is on the agenda.

BATEXPO Potential

A three-day Bangladesh Apparel and Textile Exposition (BATEXPO) is being held at Hotel Sonargaon. Inaugurated yesterday by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia the exposition in effect accords recognition to the garment sector's increasingly growing contribution to the country's economy. In the 1992-93 fiscal year the share of readymade garments' export was US\$1269 million, accounting for 53.3 per cent of the country's total export earnings from merchandise.

Clearly, this BATEXPO Exposition '94 is a fitting exposure of our fastest growing industrial sector to the outside world. On the first day, according to report, 75 or so foreign buyers from Europe, the USA and Canada arrived to participate in the garments display. The only other country to have put up stalls in this grand show is India. So this promotional drive ought to be given all kinds of patronage necessary for its success. The garment industry has already come a long way and its potential places the industry in a competitive position right at this moment. To stay in the competition the garment policy must have to be pragmatic and forward looking.

Admittedly, till now this sector has suffered from some intrinsic weaknesses. Without the remedy of which it will soon find the going very tough. The Harkins Bill and the emergence of a few countries in South East Asia as manufacturers of garments pose a challenge for our garment industry. Unless we can adjust to the changing international market situation there is no possibility of sustaining the present tempo of growth in the sector. Fortunately, a few plus points are in our favour. Cheap labour and our great tradition in textiles can surely be counted upon.

It is in this context that this present exposition can go a long way in attracting the foreign buyers. Our ability to satisfy foreign demands — both quantity- and quality-wise — must be amply demonstrated here. In the test we hope our garment manufacturers will come out successful. It is indeed heartening to know that about 80 per cent of our accessories are locally made. The potential of the allied sectors appears to have been largely exploited, but where it matters most regarding the production of fabrics and cloth, it has not received proper attention.

The fact that clothes are still imported from foreign countries is something that we should now focus our attention on for the full and independent growth of the industry. At this point we find it immensely satisfying that our local weavers have produced one variety of cloth called Grameen Check under the direct supervision of the Grameen Bank, which compares favourably with anything of the kind of foreign origin. Some foreign buyers are placing orders for import of the material. Most of our garment factories are yet to follow suit.

Our garments sector has come a long way. But now new challenges and competition lie before it. Our entrepreneurs, many of whom are young and highly educated, have proven their ability to hold their own and compete in the international market. However, to maintain their competitive position more and more backward-linkage industries will have to be located in Bangladesh. Let that be the second phase of our garment industry revolution.

IT is now a trend for both the government and the opposition to share the same illusions. However the issue of hartals appears to have brought both of these pillars of our state together in their shared fantasy that hartals have a significant impact on the development and politics of Bangladesh.

For the hartal to be effective as a political weapon it demands certain conditions. It assumes above all the existence of a dynamic economy and an effective machinery of government. Any cessation of work which paralyses these vital institutions of the polity would impact on the consciousness of the whole population who would thereby focus their attention on the specific issue around which the hartal has been called.

In the most successful hartals workers both in the non-government sector and in the administration voluntarily withhold their labour as an act of individual protest against the issue for which the hartal has been called. The most effective hartals in recent memory were those called by Bangobandhu and his party during March 1971 when the whole nation of Bangladesh spontaneously responded to his call on March 1st and onwards to withhold their labour as an instrument of protest against the decision by President Yahya Khan to frustrate the convening of Parliament on 1st March 1971.

Since those historic days of March 1971 which created the conditions for the emergence

of an independent Bangladesh we seem to have gradually lost the ability to invoke hartals of a comprehensive nature which involves the whole nation. The closest we came to matching the intensity of the 1971 hartals was in the last days of the Ershad regime particularly on the day before his final decision to resign his Presidency.

In recent years the hartal tends to be a lifeless affair where a call by a major party is enough to get motorised transport off the streets, keep people at home, with shops and quite a number of factories closed. Senior government officials get to office before dawn and stay on till the hartal ends passing their day consuming more tea and exchanging more gossip than usual. The middle classes sleep late, eat more and generally treat themselves to an extra paid holiday. In some factories which close the last days work is made up by working overtime or on a holiday. Where we have half day hartals it is relatively easy to make up the time lost by hartals. The real losers tend to be rickshaw pullers, and other forms of daily or casual labour who face an erosion in their days earnings.

However in an under-performing economy and administration such as Bangladesh the actual economic cost of such hartals tends to be exaggerated, except for the case of

Do Hartals Matter?

by Rehman Sobhan

those dependant on selling their labour on a daily basis.

In effect most of our industries observe their own private hartals throughout the year to the extent that their productive capacity remains idle in all or part for a variety of commercial, personal and institutional reasons.

For example, studies show that the number of work days lost in industrial establishments due to power failures is much higher than from hartals and factory strikes combined. Other factors such as lack of markets, exposure to competition from imports, lack of credit and management weakness keep most factories operating at below 50% capacity.

Thus in effect these factories are exposed to non-labour related work stoppages or institutional hartals for effectively half their working year. In such a situation every owner knows that a few days lost through hartals can easily be absorbed by using their existing production capacity a fraction more intensively in subsequent days. Specific problems in the case of such industries as garments where a particular firm has to meet a shipment deadline may be inconvenient. But anyone who has seen the lines of women walking home from these factories at 9 or 10 O'clock at night know that shipment deadlines are met by getting workers to work late.

Garment factory managers thus use this method to get round lost hours during a hartal.

Even shopkeepers can make up for lost sales because in a recession-ridden economy such as ours business turnover is low and lost sales during one day can be made up by buyers at another time. It is not as if we have a booming retail market with customers crowding all our shops around the clock.

As far as administration is concerned it is normally in a state of perpetual hartal with most government offices and establishments operating at around one-third of their potential working capacity. If in fact the government of Bangladesh were to close down most of its offices other than the public utilities for 6 months or at 12 noon each day it would be no loss to the people of Bangladesh and from some points of view perhaps even conducive to greater productivity in other sectors.

No doubt when a hartal frustrates or inconveniences such public 'tamashas' as inaugurating this or that function by one of our dignitaries this is a matter of annoyance to those involved in the function. But then an inauguration of some public activity is really something of a non-event which probably loses more work time in aggregate for the government through time lost by officials sitting through boring in-

augural speeches than they do because of hartals. In fact the government may consider cancelling all inauguration functions in lieu of a pledge that a project would be completed on schedule rather than anything from 1-4 years behind schedule due to the perpetual hartal which characterises most cases of project implementation.

In such an environment of low productivity, enormous under-utilisation of productivity capacity in every sector except the self-employed poor such as our farmers and complete non-seriousness about addressing the fundamentals which make Bangladesh one of the weakest performing economies in Asia, hartals appear to be neither here or there as either an instrument of political protest or as a threat to our development or non-development. The issue of hartals is now largely one of public relations and political image where a party which invokes hartals is deemed irresponsible even if such hartals cost as little as they do to our economy.

Given the low and possibly negative political returns from such hartals the present and indeed future oppositions should recognise that the hartal as a political weapon is now obsolete rather like the 303 rifle. In the age of lasers and micro-electronics our po-

litical parties should also be updating their instruments of political protest, designing political technologies which can really hurt a government whilst getting their message across to the voting public and indeed involving citizens in such acts of public protest. Unfortunately or fortunately this is not an area where I have any expertise to contribute. However our political entrepreneurs should certainly start rethinking both their political tactics and instruments of protest if they want to be more politically effective in pressuring the government whilst winning the hearts and minds of the public to their own political cause.

In turn the government should recognise that their protestations of injury to the development process because of hartal calls lacks credibility to an average citizen of Bangladesh who is daily exposed to the hartal of the administration in most areas of public life due to failure of these public servants to do work they should do, promptly or effectively. If the government wants to minimise the effect of hartals and put a few feathers in their cap they would do well to get all their officials to attend office on time, put in a good days work efficiently and with low transaction costs to the public. The real problem facing Bangladesh does not lie in a few work days lost in hartals but the all pervasive culture of non-performance and lack of public accountability in both the government and private sector.

INDIA has three chief ministers from backward castes: Mulayam Singh Yadav in Uttar Pradesh, Veerappa Moily in Karnataka and Laloo Prasad Yadav in Bihar. I visited their states in the past few weeks and have returned with the impression that if betterment is the criterion they will not secure even one mark out of 10.

People of lower castes remain poor, uncertain and helpless. The administrations are heavily tilted against them and there is no end to police atrocities when it comes to the lowest among them, Dalits or Harijans as they are called. That a backward is the chief minister has made a bit of psychological difference but only a bit; the reality on the ground has not changed. The reach and riches of upper castes remain undiminished and the diffidence and deprivation of the lower unremitting.

Starting with UP, tension between upper and backward castes is in the open. It is mounting and, at some places, it is so raw that one can even taste it. Meerut and Kanpur are the two areas where there were caste riots recently. Still, hints of worse things to come are strewn all over the state. UP is a sad combination of communalism and casteism.

And just as hundreds of temples came up on the forcibly occupied lands during the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) regime, the statues of B R Ambedkar, the tallest among Dalits, are being raised on public property. Belated instructions have been issued to district collectors to stop vandalism. But if leaders themselves

foment trouble the government action becomes only a formality.

Bihar, where I spent most of my time, is different in one way: the initial spurt in chauvinism and expectations on the part of the backward has waned. Laloo, who has been the state chief minister for more than four years, is no more a messiah he was looked up to once. The Yadavs still feel superior in the belief that he is from their community. Other backward castes see no difference between him and his predecessors. There is no dent in the abysmal life of abject degradation they have been leading. He and those who are close to the seats of power are the beneficiaries, not the vast multitude of gullible Biharis.

Karnataka has the distinction of sporting a number of backward chief ministers. Before Moily there was Bangarappa! But lower caste people have remained tethered to poverty. In other fields — employment, health and equality at the hands of law — change, if any, has come at snail's pace. Social and economic programmes are superficial. Karnataka is one of the worst examples of police excesses.

A human rights activists group visited Gulbarga town and district in the state and found a systematic pattern of caste violence. "As for the police," the group says in a report, "they have remained passive spectators to caste atroci-

ties and have often even conspired with local vested interests in the oppression of Dalits. In a notorious lathi charge incident, they exhibited savage brutality and high-handedness towards Dalits who had dared to agitate against police inaction."

What I saw in UP, Karnataka and Bihar holds true for the rest of India. The treatment meted out to lower castes puts in shade the plight of Negroes in the deep south of America. The Supreme Court rulings there have begun to change

has taken great objection to 'Harijan', a name which Mahatma Gandhi gave to the untouchables. Gandhiji was a revolutionary, who wanted to change the attitude of Hindus, their thinking. He was no caste-system defender.

He could not risk dividing the society when he was wanting all support for his agitation against the British. He expected that by his own example — living in a Bangli (sweepers') colony, cleansing his own toilet and equating the untouchables with the children

Politics of Reservations

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

things but not in India where the caste has the sanction of Hindu religion. The RSS chief, Rajendra Singh, who is daily haranguing about mosques by the side of temples in Mathura and Varanasi, will do well to the Hindus if he talks about the indignities the lower castes suffer at the hands of upper castes. But then the agenda of RSS has been political, never social.

Kanshi Ram, who is trying to exploit the Dalits through his Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), is also talking in terms of political power. He reminds me of a Texas cattle raiser who neglected to brand his cattle. Kanshi Ram has finally resurrected the word of Dalit and

of god (Harijan) — he would bring down the wall of prejudice that stood between the upper and lower castes. But he could make only a small difference and realised it when he said on the advent of independence that he wanted a casteless and classless India. He was not on the scene for long.

Jawaharlal Nehru radicalised the Hindu society by giving women, through a legislation, the right to divorce and property, despite stiff opposition. But he could not oust untouchability, although he made it an offence in the constitution and gave untouchables the status of scheduled castes, entitled to reservations in parliament and legislature and in

employment and educational institutions. Ambedkar had gone along because it was he who had piloted the constitution in the Constituent Assembly. Had he differed, he could have refused to sign the document, as some Sikh leaders did to register their protest. It is no use introducing new arguments at this stage.

Reservations, as the history has shown, have proved to be, if anything, only palliatives. They have got politicised and what was started as a 10-year measure has gone on for more than four decades. There is no end in sight. They have become crutches and some Dalit leaders have rightly demanded their abolition. Upper castes believe that they can go on merrily with their discriminatory attitude because reservations make up for their sins.

Former prime minister V P Singh made the same mistake by extending reservations to the other backward classes (OBC). Finding a place in the sun for the people who had been treated inferior, although they did not carry even the stigma of untouchability, was the task worth doing. But he went the wrong way. He fought his political battle — his deputy prime minister Devi Lal was a threat to him — through social reforms and divided the society intractably.

True, millions of people, silent and subdued, got their voice. But it has resulted in confrontations and unaccom-

modating attitudes. Once again the real point of reforming the Hindu society has got lost in the jungle of reservations. If only V P Singh had articulated the case of the have-nots, who bear the burden in all castes and in all religions, in India caste and class are coterminous on a wide scale.

With reservations for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes on the one hand and the same concessions for backward classes on the other, India is left only with a little leeway because the kitty has not expanded much. Even special rights are being cornered by what the Supreme Court of India has characterised "the creamy layer." Still worse is the attitude of those who have made it in lower castes; they want to relate more to the upper than the lower to get away from the prejudice they have suffered in their lives.

Whatever else reservations may have done, it has fractured the Indian society. Had job quotas and admissions to technical institutes initiated a process of effecting social reforms and improving the lot of lower castes, India would have had a target to achieve. But now the attention is on the vote bank, the political fallout of reservations. Consequently, the people of lower castes continue to live separate and distant in the countryside. In the same squalor and in the same shanties where sickly children and scrawny cows have stayed together for years. No doubt, the nation has given lower castes concessions, but if it had given them only an economic chance, they might have cast off discrimination one day.

Novel Campaign in Brazil : Millions against Misery

IN Brazil, where the privilege of the few is rivalled only by the destitution of the many, a campaign against misery and in favour of life has succeeded in making society acknowledge the country's endemic poverty.

Conducted by millions of citizens from all parts of Brazil, this one-year initiative has begun to change society's attitude. Now, more and more people are taking some responsibility for the problem of poverty, which was previously seen here as an issue between the hungry and the government.

About 80 million of Brazil's 150 million inhabitants are poor, while the destitute — those who lack access even to the basket of foods that the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and the World Health Organisation consider necessary for the nutrition of a family — number 32 million.

Early last year, the Movement for Ethics in Politics, made up of 900 non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

decried poverty was incompatible with democracy and created Citizens Acting Against Misery and for Life.

By the end of 1993, according to a recent investigation by the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics, 25 million Brazilians or equivalent to 32 per cent of the adult population had participated in the Citizens Action group, donating food, clothing, and other goods.

A full 2.8 million people or 11 per cent of the donors also joined the movement's committees embracing neighborhood associations, NGOs, ecclesiastic, union, and professional organisations, public and private managers, artists and professors.

The initiative operates in two ways. The Council for Food Security made up of eight ministers and 21 lay representatives is in charge of governmental action. Popular action is carried out by Committees of Citizens Against Misery, which already has 3,500 centres

Disillusioned by empty promises of politicians, Brazilians have launched a novel campaign against misery. Herbert de Souza describes the movement to end hunger in this report for Inter Press Service from Rio De Janeiro.

throughout the country and opens more each day.

The goals of the movement are to provide emergency relief — food distribution — achieve structural change and promote the creation of jobs.

Its ways of reaching these goals have been varied. Last September, for instance, more than 500 artists including star musicians Chico Buarque, Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil collaborated in an Art Week Against Hunger in Rio de Janeiro.

Food became the entrance fee for the shows while the Citizens Contracts programme was launched enabling people to pay for the food to feed a family for one year.

Then there are the committees created by the management and 120,000 employees of the Bank of Brazil at its 5,000 branches. About a hundred of these have already been set up and cooperate to donate food to communities and playgrounds as well as to the poor in their own neighborhoods.

With few exceptions, communications media have backed the campaign and taken a fundamental role in raising consciousness and mobilising support. Another crucial factor contributing to the expansion of Citizens Action in Brazilian society is its ability to make people consider the possibility of a political alterna-

tion. The role of a citizen goes beyond that of electing officials belonging to a party, or being on the right or the left. The political participation of the common citizen can and must be broadened and made more active, more simple and constant.

The exercise of citizenship is a permanent one that even in this early form Brazil is beginning to discover and practice.

While it is clear much work remains undone, the primary victory lies in having begun the process of raising consciousness of the fact that hunger, misery, and social exclusion are leading Brazil to the edge of an abyss.

If this point of view has reached many, it can reach all — including the elite, who up until now believed the would be saved from the storm because they were in the first class compartment of the ship.

A future challenge of the movement will be to persuade economists that their plans to

fight inflation are detached from reality and that their structural adjustment programmes fail to take into account the needs of society.

Misery is the oldest daughter of the Brazilian economic disaster and serves as a constant reminder that fighting hunger must be a centerpiece in any model for development of this country.

This must be kept in mind as this October's elections draw near. Citizens Action plans to question all candidates on their political platforms and ensure that they do not forget the 32 million destitute and the 80 million poor.

With the same force that they took over the national agenda of 1993, hunger and misery must now fight their way into the electoral debate and become a central theme of every campaign.

The movement's objective is to make the fight against poverty a part of every party's platform and a priority of both the next government and all of Brazilian society.

To the Editor...

Anti-mosquito drive

Sir, We heartily congratulate the Dhaka City Corporation Mayor Mohammad Hanif on launching anti-mosquito plus cleaning drive in the city. It is sincerely expected that this practice will not end after the stipulated fortnight but will continue till mosquitoes become a thing of the past in this metropolis.

M Zahidul Haque
Asstt Prof., BAI, Dhaka.

Hartal

Sir, I wonder for whose interest or gain the opposition parties call for 'hartals'. If they really cared for the country or its people, they would be working to the people to walk

harder with dedication to build this country. The Germans built their fatherland (Vaterland) after the 2nd World War by working as long as they were awake for half a loaf and some sugar or butter. Why can't we? We can if we want and try and stand up to those who have other ideas. Wake up my brothers and sisters.

Sahib Hossain
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Richard M Nixon

Sir, I fully support the views of S A M S Kibria regarding our editorial in which Richard Nixon was highly honoured for his deeds as US President. But, however popular he was among the Americans, for the people

Dapunia model election

Sir, We congratulate the Election Commission on holding a free, fair and model elec-

tion to Dapunia Union Parishad in Mymensingh. We also felicitate the people of the union in general and the voters in particular for exercising their right of franchise freely, judiciously and peacefully without any intimidation, irregularity and violence with the help of their newly issued identity card. This is for the first time in the history of Bangladesh that no complaint, irregularity, violence or allegation was reported from any quarter during election.

It may be pointed out that even election held under the caretaker government headed by Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed in 1991 some political parties left no stone unturned to raise hue and cry of alleged

malpractices. The situation reached its climax after Magura-2 by-election held under the present democratically elected government. We have however seen a ray of hope in Dapunia Model election to save our democracy from any challenge.

We strongly believe that whether a general election under a caretaker government or under a democratically elected government we can not stop some of our political parties from making allegations and counter allegations of irregularities, vote rigging and violence in the election. The imperative need of the time is therefore to make situation conducive to holding a fool-proof general election as far as practically possible. We there-

fore strongly feel that Dapunia Model election is the only solution to our political problems in the greater interest of democracy.

We would request all concerned including the Election Commission, Members of the Parliament both in the ruling and opposition parties to help prepare a correct and up-to-date voters list, issue identity cards to all voters to follow the successful model of Dapunia union election for the whole of the country.

All we need is the politics of solution and not the politics of problems in our country.

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