Dhaka, Wednesday, May 18, 1994

A Grand Housing Plan

Housing in the private sector has so far remained more a disoriented effort rather than a coordinated policy thrust. This approach characterised by a lack of seriousness may soon undergo a major change with a plan reportedly receiving a green signal from the concerned ministries of the government. An ambitious plan, no doubt, if and when put into place, this has the potential to benefit a substantial portion of the hard-pressed city population. Meant for the middle and lowermiddle class people, specially for service-holders, this programme however is a brain-child of a pioneer housing society of the country.

It is good news that the government has found merits in the plan and is intent on extending the necessary co-operation for the successful implementation of the same. The details of the plan have been worked out in such a way that it may not ultimately look as tall an order as it appeared at first sight. Actually pooling the resources is the hardest part of the job. According to the plan this will be met by using the idle bank money. Another option that has been left open is to seek the major portion of the fund from the Asian Development Bank (ABD). Of course, foreign donor agencies and local banks will be of no less help.

The beauty of the proposed plan is that it will not impose quite a big burden on the intended beneficiaries. Initially 115,000 flats will be built in the city. These flats will be sold for an initial ceiling price and the rest will be payable in instalments over a period of 25 years. The instalments are expected to involve no bigger an amount than the rent an average family of the class under scrutiny has to pay each month. Any family that has been fortunate enough to have savings in the region of Tk 100,000 to 235,000 will, if it wishes so, be a proud owner of a flat.

If everything proceeds according to the plan and it is allowed to complete its full circle, we have reasons to be optimistic about the solution of the present housing crisis in the city. Currently, this area has gone totally out of control. Whims rather than any rationale guide the fixing of house rents. The excessive pressure on the existing accommodation facilities has put the service-holders at the wrong end of the bargain. Unless things are made easier for the tenants through such radical programmes as the proposed one, the house owners will refuse to see the points of the other party. So far the bargain and terms have been unilateral. Now is the time for exposing the flaws in the prevailing system.

The high rates of house rent have their adverse impacts on society and service situation. Such arbitrarily raised rates contribute to the escalation of living costs and even to the spread of corruption for obvious reasons. So this proposed measure is going to take the problem by the scruff. But even such a creditable plan can be foiled by unscrupulous elements who look for their own interests more than the common good. For reasons understandable the flats have to be multi-storied and so no faulty design or use of substandard construction materials can be allowed. Past experiences have shown how indiscreet our engineers and contractors can be when and where public money is involved.

Here public money will not be used exactly in the manner it is done in case of a bridge, a highway or buildings or complexes. But the fear of the contractors resorting to a strait-jacket formula of profit-making will always loom large unless a failsafe monitoring system can be introduced. After all, there is no scope for tinkering with the quality of the flats both in terms of their design, facilities and materials used. That will spell disaster for the whole project. The flats must not crumble like the school buildings after 10-15 years. We hope the project will be completed with the efficiency and seriousness it deserves.

Turning to Jute

The profile of our export trade during the first seven months of the current fiscal year shows that the export earning fell short of the target by 6.63 per cent. The short-fall in monetary terms being US112.14 million dollars, it cannot obviously be trifled with. Especially when it involves a sector which is said to be designed to play a leading part in our growth strategy. Export-led growth is what we are aiming at.

How much of the short-fall has occurred due to an under-performance on our part and what proportion of this is ascribable to the international market adversity are obviously very pertinent questions. And, answers to these have to be found for overcoming the short-comings before a cumulative short-fall inexorably builds up. Importantly, the trend, as revealed by the Export Promotion Bureau, points to a reversal of fortunes being undergone by traditional merchandise including particularly jute and jute goods. Exports from the non-traditional sector have, by and large, increased.

This fact is corroborated by what transpired at the 7-day meeting of the IJO council and project committee which concluded in the city on Sunday. The Executive Director of IJO K.M. Rabbani said that the market for jute goods was shrinking in the USA, Japan and Australia. The IJO faces an organisational, funding and marketing setback - all rolled in one - because of the imminent possibility of the US' withdrawing its membership from the body. It is particularly a negative development in view of the fact the IJO is just about warming up to its role in taking forward jute in its race with the synthetic.

Market-wise, the whole of the African continent is worth exploring by us. Jute-based textiles should have a good prospect in Latin America. To be able to compete India and China we need to have trade representation in Africa and Latin America, on a selective basis though. This is the finding of our exporters who have been lately to some countries on informal exploratory missions. We cannot be on the export map by the sole virtue of private travelling.

Our real chance to make a sizable dent in the world market is offered by the BCIC's plan to produce pulp with jute for the manufacture of cost-effective paper. The green jute pulp opens a new horizon on the diversified use of jute with may countries having already shown an active interest not only to invest but lift it as well. The green jute success can also help win back many farmers to the cultivation of jute they had felt dejected about on account of a non-remunerative price of raw jute.

The Daily Star Public Debate

The Proposition is: Should the Next General Elections be Held under a Caretaker Government?

URANJIT Senguptar Suranjit Sengupta, leader of Ganotantri Party and Member the Ganotantri Party (GP) believes that all the of Parliament makes out his case in favour of the proposition national level elections - not the next general elections only Interviewed by Nurul Kabir

> About the recent government proposal for strengthening, both legally and organisationally, the Election Commission (EC) to ensure fair pollings, Suranjit Sengupta said, 'it would not help in the holding of a neutral elections.

should be held under a rion-

partisan care-taker govern-

ment. "Parliamentary elections

uncler a care-taker governn ient

are a must for giving

democracy an institutio nal

shape in Bangladesh. This is

necessary because the

electoral process had be en

tampered with by governments

in the past," Sengup ta

the concept, the GP lead er

said that the holding of free

and fare elections was one of

the fundamental preconditions

of democracy. "But the ruler's,

especially the military rulers of

the past, had destroyed the

electoral process through

denying the country's people

their right to vote in a free p >-

litical environment". Sengup ta

commented and added the it

the military governments had

held referendums in the pa st

with the voters almost absent

from the polling booths, to

justify their usurpation of

statepower by illegal mean s.

The experiences of the past

elections have made the peo-

ple lose confidence in the ex-

isting electoral process, a c-

cording to Sengupta. The only

non-controversial elections the

nation had in Bangladesh we re

the ones held under the care-

taker government, headed lyv

Acting President Justice

Shahabuddin Ahmed, in 1991

Sengupta said and added that

it would have been impossible

to have such fair elections un-

cially those born out of can-

tonments,' seemed to have de-

veloped a tendency to influ-

ence the elections to stay in

power by any means including

rigging of votes, terrori srn

against political opponents,

using black money, 'me dia

coup' and, above all, using the

administrative machinery in

their favour, the GP leader

ing Bangladesh Nation alist

Party (BNP) to hold a ne utral

general elections, and it was

proved in the by-election the

Magura-2 constituency.

'So none can expect the rul-

The political parties, espe-

der a party government.

Explaining his position on

observed.

Explaining the reasons for such apprehension, the GP leader argued that the public servants of the country had de-

provision of the care-taker government. He believed that one or two general elections under a care taker administration would not suffice to remove the corrupt electoral culture which had been in practice here since long.

So, the nation needs to incorporate the concept of a care-taker government into

nation might be faced with a problem of constitutional discontinuity.

proposed for incorporating the concept during the drafting of the historic Joint Declaration of the three political alliances in November 1991. But I failed to convince the major component of the then eight party alliance Awami League (AL), about the need for the provision", the GP leader recalled. 'I tried to



he constitution to avert the possible discontinuation of constitutional process, he said. According to Sengupta's formula. the elected prime minister would handover power to the deputy prime minister nominated on the basis of consensus reached by the parties concerned.

With the resignation of the elected premier, the deputy premier, nominated by all. would take over as premier and form his or her cabinet on principles set unitedly by the ruling party and the opposition, GP leader explained.

Sengupta also felt that his concept of the care-taker government was against affecting the institution of the head of the state. "Because, the head of the state — the Presidenthas to be there to conduct oath of the head of the government i.e the prime minister of the care-taker govern-

Notably, no member of the interim cabinet, including its head, would be eligible for taking part in the general elec-

tions, Sengupta asserted. According to his proposal. the head of the care-taker government would take over power three months ahead of the elections, conduct the polling with the help of the election commission and hand over power to the leader of the house elected during the first session of the new parliament emerging through the general elections.

Asserting the demand for the care taker government once again, Suranjit Sengupta told The Daily Star that the BNP should immediately accept the proposition. 'Begum Zia must understand the whole nation, even her long-time political partner Jamaat-e-Islami, has rallied round the demand, Sengupta said and added that the BNP's hesitation to meet the demand would eventually further isolate the party from the people.

Tomorrow Barrister Nazmul Huda, Vice-Chairman of **Bangladesh Nationalist Party** and Minister for Information and Broadcasting argues against the proposition.

the Constitution of the State', assert my position once again during the drafting of Sengupta a member of the All constitutional powers of an elected government be granted to the interim cabinet. Otherwise, the

With the resignation of the elected premier, the deputy premier, nominated by all, would take over as premier and form the cabinet on principles set unitedly by the ruling party and the opposition. My concept of the caretaker government is against affecting the institution of the head of the state.

Because, the head of the state — president —has to be there to conduct out h of the head of the government i.e. the prime minister of the caretaker government.

veloped a tendency to serve the government — and not the State. 'Most of the bureaucrats confuse between the State and the government', Sengupta observed, 'as a result, the government officials' service, during elections, goes definitely in favour of the government headed by any political party'.

When requested to put forward his views on another government proposal for enacting laws in parliament prohibiting the government to transfer of ficials three months ahead of the elections, the GP leader said, 'we find it important to enact laws with a view to strengthening the EC and making the government abstain from giving postings of the officials ahead of the elections, but these measures are not alternative to the holding of elections under the caretaker government.

The constitutional provision for the caretaker government would help change the country's present electoral culture plagued with immorality, nepotism, greed for power and opportunism, Sengupta felt.

The GP leader, in this connection told The Daily Star that he did not believe in a temporary arrangement for the Drafting Committee Bangladesh Constitution in

1972. observed. Refuting arguments put forward by the BNP leaders that there is no example in the world of the constitutional provision for holding elections under a care-taker govern ment, Sengupta said, each na tion has its own unique way of developing democratic institutions and Bangladesh is not an exception. We had the last general elections under a caretaker government which was unique to Bangladesh and unprecedented in many parts of the world the GP leader said. and added that more than one African nations were now thinking of introducing the system of holding elections under a care-taker government. What the barrister ministers of Begum Khaleda Zia's cabinet need to understand is the fact that constitutional politics is not a static process, "in a lively democracy it changes shapes and dimen sions according to the practi-

Unlike many politicians, Suranjit Sengupta has been struggling for the provision for holding elections under caretaker government since 1991.

cal need of the hour".

12th Amendment to the Constitution, seeking a switchover to the parliamentary system of governance. But again I failed to convince my colleagues in parliarnent Sengupta regretted Commenting on the AL's present seriousness on the issue. Sengupta's comment was. better late than never. Suranjit, analysing the ruling party's attitude towards the care-taker government, said that 'the BNP leaders had been reacting against the issue as if introduction of the system would amount to their defeat by the Opposition. Bu't it is not correct'. Because if the constitutional amendment seeking national level election is under a care-taker government is adopted, it is the old corrupt system which will be defeated the remnant of autocracy which will be defeated by an improved democracy, and not the BNP, Sengupta observed. He also said the BNP could take credit for introducing an improved system of polling and thus contribute to the further development of democracy in Bangladesh. Suranjit, however, felt that there exists a cornmunication gap between the ruling party

duct the general elections only. Sengupta said. The exact timing of the two is a matter for discussion. Effective dialogue on the issue would remove the gap between the ruling party and the opposition, the GP leader felt. But Sengupta, while giving

an outline of the care-taker

government, favoured granting

all constitutional powers of an

elected government to the in-

and the Opposition on the

question of the concept of the

care-taker government.

Referring to the Prime

Minister's observation that a

care-taker government, com-

prising of nominated mem-

bers, could not be an alterna-

tive to a government elected

by the people. Sengupta said.

we did not propose the care-

taker government as an alter-

native to the elected govern-

ment. The elected govern

ment would run the country

for five years, while the care-

taker government would con-

terim cabinet. 'Otherwise,. the nation might be faced with a problem of constitutional discontinuity. the GP leader argued.

The provision for appointing a deputy prime minister is also to be incorporated into

How could the government act

so irresponsibly and who or

Imaginary Conversation, with the Minister for Education

N our present day culture. we have no conversation. Perhaps conversation is something alien to our nature. Even in our drawing rooms, a promising conversation soon turns into a high-pitche i medley of words, with ever / body speaking and no body listening. Being very much a part of the society, my compet ence to pronounce on this reational characteristics may be questioned. Please do not take it as a final judgement, only a passing observation, supported by my experience in our sitting rooms, and the nation's experience of the way the nation's leaders talk in their drawing room, the Sangsad.

I wish I could have a real conversation with someone who shares my interest in education. Could it be our education minister? Would it be too presumptuous? Or, will he have the time? What is happening to our education, and what his government has on the agenda in respect of education, and in order of priorities? I would like to hear him particularly about higher education because I have heard him making am inspired speech on this to pic. The occasion was some kind of a formal inauguration of one of the private universitie s. It was obvious that the horrble minister saw great prospects for higher education in the fact that private universities had made their appearance at long last. He, as far as I remember, made no secret of his hopes that these will snacceed where the existing universities have

failed. The unease I felt that morning over our minister's warmth of feeling toward the new and his despair about the old is a matter that will not detain me now. Perhaps, on some other

I am sorry that I cannot build up a framework for an imaginary conversation on this topic, higher education, with the minister on the other side of the table. What I fear is that my questions or my concerns may not be his questions or his concerns. So my intended conversation may not, after all, turn into a real dialogue. We might even be talking at cross purposes. With all these misgivings in my mind, I am proposing a framework for a possible dialogue. I am, in my imagination, face to face with our minister. He has graciously asked me to come with my questions and has kindly promised to answer them, at least to ponder over them, and to respond at a place and time that would suit him. I have felt

very very obliged. So here we are. I begin by saying, after the formal greetings, of course, that I come to talk, to discuss, to learn from him, and not to hurl questions only, though, in a meeting such as this, he must expect a few questions, too.

I start by mentioning a report, a heart-warming news. from Sylhet: Shah Jalal University is running strictly on schedule. It is the only university that has known no session-

Isn't it wonderful news, Minister Sahib? Congratulations, not for you really but for those in the university, to be conveyed by you. The minister appears to be happy, though denied any personal credit for Sylhet's success, which he secretly ascribes to my perver-

As things are today, I continue in a cheerful vein, this news should be taken as more than a news. It is an invitation to come and see, to talk and

find out how this has been made possible. Sylhet is not a place without politics. Sylhet is very much in the news on the Sylhet division issue. Has the university been able to keep clear of this movement? Have they found an immunity against politics, or a politics sans ha-

The news, for me, be tokens a harmonious relationship existing between different groups of students, between teachers and students, between different groups of teachers, between students and administration, may be also a situation in which

nanced by Education Ministry, and administered by the Ministry of Defence, under a special arrangement. Similar allegations and similar desertions, though not common, have happened in the past. I ask the Minister whether he has followed the news. And if he considers that it is a news without much significance — the college authorities are quite com-

embarrassing for the minister

The Cadet Colleges are, to the

best of my knowledge, fi-

petent to deal with the matter then, arising out of this, what did he think about elitist education at public cost gen-CLOUDS

PASSING Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

groups are non-existent. though this is difficult to visualise. At any rate the Sylhet case is worth examining, if only to find out a formula for peace for most of our colleges and universities, afflicted by dissension and feud, plagued by bloody clashes and closures, and finally ending up with session-jams.

The minister agrees to my suggestion, rather vaguely. Apparently he is on his guard, and will not commit himself on a sensitive issue. He Knows perhaps that I have held the government - and the political parties - largely responsible for our troubles on the campus. And he doesn't quite believe that I wish him well, as much as I wish our educational sys-

I know that the other news from Sylhet — about forty students from Sylhet Cadet College having fled in fright and protest against the Principal's alleged harsh dealings with students - could be slightly erally, and about cadet colleges in particular?

I don't expect the minister to come out with a clear statement on this two-pronged question, immediately. The desertion issue may be of minor concern, but the other one elitism in education — is more central. I allow the minister the privilege of silence, and pass on to my next concern: the striking students of the five new medical colleges.

According to newspaper reports, minister sahib, the students of the five medical colleges went on strike because they have come to discover that the colleges they have been admitted to lacked almost every thing they needed for a proper prosecution of their studies: books, teachers, class rooms, hostel accommodation, laboratories, hospitals, etc. In fact they had been admitted without the minimum preparations having been made that go with the concept of a medical college.

which authorities are responsible for this? Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Public Health? If the latter ministry is still in control of medical education as it has been in the past, is there any thought of bringing it under the Ministry of Education, and bringing the medical colleges closer to the universities? The idea has been advocated in the past but nothing appears to have changed

I will not bother you with the reforms suggested - both in administrative setup and course content - regarding medical education in the two Education Commission Reports, especially of the latest one (1988), but may I ask you how the establishment of five new medical colleges got priority and so much so that students were admitted without waiting for adequate preparations made for their reception and proper academic care?

And how do I explain this fact that in the well-considered 14-point Recommendations in this field, establishment of new medical colleges does not figure at all? Is it blindness on the part of the Education Commission, (BMA too could be included in this strange-to-explain oversight) or is it playing politics for political gain?

I do not get — in this imaginary conversation -- ready answers or responses from the minister, and I console myself that perhaps he is making mental notes, to be used for a future question hour in the Sangsad. Nearly two hundred thou-

sands private secondary school and college teachers are still on strike, and this must be oc-

cupying fully his mind. And this thought crosses my mind too. So I refrain from bringing up other issues. I do not ask him what he proposes to do in respect of the demands of the striking teachers; if he thinks a mere repetition of what the government has already done by way of meeting the demands is enough, or a fresh examination of the whole question of government and nongovernment schools and colleges and government policy toward the latter is contemplated. He must have his own thoughts about this and other related issues; otherwise he will not be our Education Minister. I think I see him looking at his watch so I take the hint.

I prepare to leave, with a last request. He can, perhaps he should, have his weekly press briefings on whatever is happening in his world, the world of education. The Press is never idle in reporting whatever it thinks has some news value. The reporters are either too lazy or too ignorant in make news stories of the more positive developments in education; and I am sure there are things to report of a more cheerful import. One useful way of letting the people know some of the recent gains in this area, some of the new thoughts the ministry has or the minister has, is to adopt this idea of a regular press briefing. The minister's presence in all these meetings may not be necessary; occasionally he can be represented by a spokesman appearing in his behalf. Unprecedented? Well, the whole scene is far from normal and there exists and information gap. Once this has been removed, the practice can be dropped, but there is no harm in giving it a trial.

Do not let the JS down

Sir, I always read your marvelous editorials along with the objective column "The Third View" as I have a penchant and voracious appetite for current topic and also good English. You have rightly diagnosed (The Third View, May 5) the Berniuda triangle of AL-BNP-people: BNP took off with advantage's but with all its bluster it lost control of the reins of governance. The other party letting JS down in invincible because of BNP's dogma. 1972-75 era is not forgotten by voters who also know that for AL, power is all that matters. But both BNP and AL believe people are fools. AL prefers street agitation while PM thinks JS as a power besting with 5% attendance. The perceptions are widely diver-

Your concept of "personal relationship" has done miracles in S Africa, Chile, Mexico, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Australia, Canada, Poland, etc. The sanctimony and uncompromising attitude of both parties may look great at rallies but have widened gap between voters and leaders "letting us down" to quote your goodself. Leaders of treasury and opposition bench should visit Diet, House of Commons and Capital Hill while in session. Ghulam Murshid Dhaka

A new era for South Africa

Sir, Over centuries the white minority ruled in South Africa and the black majority suffered. They fought and shed the blood of each other. But today it is a down of a new era. Forget and forgive and build the country anew is the theme for the millions. It is indeed thrilling to see the bud of a great revolution burgeon in South Africa.

After 350 years of colonial rule and following the country's first all-race election, South Africa's white President De Klerk has handed over power to its black President Nelson Mandela, and Mandela has appointed De Klerk as his Vice President.

Rarely in the history of the world we find personalities like Nelson Mandela and De Klerk who work so close shoulder to shoulder, heart to heart for the welfare of the people and the country at

People all over the world cannot forget the acts of abnegation of Mandela and Klerk. Both new President Nelson Mandela and former President De Klerk have urged South Africans of all races to forget the past and join in building a united country. We congratulate both President Nelson Mandela and Vice President De Klerk on their monumental

achievement and wish them more success in future. Q H Kabir Dhaka-1203

Bangla alphabet books

Sir, Recently I was asked by my mother to purchase some books of Bangla Barnamala (alphabet) which she would distribute to some slum children. Accordingly, I bought some books and had a look through one of the copies of the book. I was greatly surprised to find some really hard examples in it. I don't know whether the little children could understand such exam

ples!

Meanwhile when I searched for the publisher's name of the book. I discovered to my utter astonishment that the book has been published from Calcutta, India. It is really a matter of great regret that Bangladesh being the only country with Bangla as its state language has to import even Bangla alphabet books from abroad. I would strongly suggest the concerned education authority

to take necessary measures so that locally produced unified and identical Bangla Barnamala books for the children can be made available in the local markets M Zahidul Haque

Asstt Prof. BAI. Dhaka