

Feature



WILL this summit merely be a high point in our expressions of good intentions and enthusiasm and excitement, or will it be the start of a process of a fundamental change which we absolutely need?

Let's be realistic... the road from Rio is going to be more difficult than the road to Rio.

United Nations Conference for Environment and Development (UNCED) Secretary-General Maurice Strong uttered those words two years ago at a press conference on a Sunday morning on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. It was obvious the Canadian diplomat did not let the heady cocktail of exhaustion and euphoria cloud his judgement. Like an explorer who had spent two years trying to plot the course to an Atlantis-like world of sustainable development, Strong was confident the route had been charted. But the pitfalls, and other perils of the journey ahead were all too clear.

Two years on and, as usual, Strong's foresight proved to be more accurate than he could imagine. In an interview with Our Planet he was the first to admit it.

The momentum of Rio has been lost at the government level and the fundamental changes needed to head off impending disaster are no closer to reality than they were two years ago — in fact things have gone backwards if anything, says Strong, who now heads the Costa Rica-based Earth Council, which has been set up to monitor Rio's follow-up, and is Chairman of Ontario Hydro in Canada. 'In the South there has been some increase in living standards in some places such as Asia and parts of South America but it is with the same old unsustainable ways.'

As Strong and others would admit, there has been some progress in areas of policy. Climate change, nuclear waste dumping at sea and biological diversity are but three important ones. It is now obvious that Rio marked a Rubicon of sorts when it comes to coupling environment and development as well as involving

non-governmental organizations.

**A shift in attitude**

Another spot in an otherwise cloudy future is a shift in attitude on the part of two of the world's crucial players: the United States and China. Both Washington, due to the Clinton-Gore administration, and Beijing, with their new comprehensive national Agenda 21 plan, seem much more receptive to the concept of sustainable development. However, it remains to be seen how these new attitudes translate into action.

Then there are those crucial issues — such as finance, including the restructuring of the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and technology transfer — that seem to underpin to the whole sustainable development process, and that are far from being resolved. Ditto for the issue of consumption and of lifestyle patterns, which are crucial factors in the lopsided ratio that marks the difference between life in the North and the South. Indeed the recession in the world economy in the past two years has proved just how difficult squaring that equation has been and will be.

**Counting the cost**

In fact, the deepening world recession added a major — and somewhat unexpected — roadblock months after heads of states and delegates left Brazil and returned home with grand plans for achieving sustainable development. In addition to the cost of placing peacekeepers in various international hotspots such as Bosnia and Somalia has left the till empty when it comes to new funding for financing what the UNCED Secretariat estimated would be a US \$125 billion per annum price tag for implementing the 40 chapters of Agenda 21.

'Instead it is basically a sum zero game when it comes to new money,' said Cliff Curtis, an international policy advisor with Greenpeace. 'There was approximately \$4 to \$5 billion pledged in Rio in new funds and very little if any of that has materialized.' Nowadays many international financial experts who have worked closely with the financial issue concede that the crucial question is no longer 'new' money.

The question now is making use of existing money in the most efficient way, says Hussein Abaza, chief economist and head of UNEP's Economics and Environment division. 'This is especially true when it comes to making the best possible use of money spent by various United Na-

# Environment

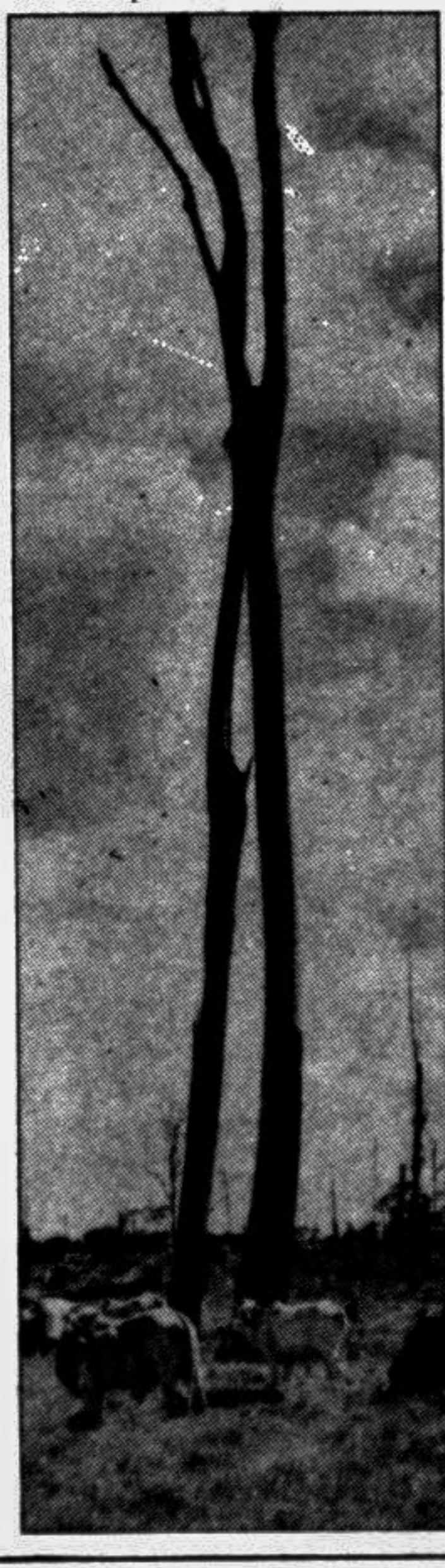
## RIO : TWO YEARS ON

by Joe Kirwin

tions agencies as well as bilateral and multilateral development institutions. It is also equally true when it comes to the policy reforms required to be introduced to ensure the sustainability of implemented activities and programmes.

As Abaza is quick to point out, the financial crunch that has plagued implementation of sustainable development in the South is, if anything, worse today than it was two years ago.

In many cases today, the economies of the South are being strangled on the one hand by World Bank and IMF reforms which have not proved to have passed the sustainability criteria; debt burden and unfair international economic relations, Abaza explained. 'On the other hand there are unfair terms of trade, including the use of policy instruments such as subsidies, that have distorted commodity prices and the competitiveness of devel-



oping countries in the international market.'

Let's face it, the funding for subsequent sustainable development will not be resolved until there is a level playing field in the global marketplace, Abaza added. 'Capacity-building in the developing world is a great idea and very fashionable but two things have to happen: subsidies must be removed — and the GATT negotiations last year proved how difficult that will be. Also environmental and social costs of products should be internalized to reflect their real costs and to make sure the full value of the commodity is borne by the consumer and producer.'

### Economic instruments pinpointed

At recent workshops and at the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) inter-annual meetings on the finance issue, economic instruments — especially in the form of 'green taxes' — in both developed and developing nations, have been pinpointed as a likely way to raise needed funds for sustainable development. The latest green tax proposed would slap a levy on airlines.

The possibility of reforming national taxation systems to shift the bulk of the tax burden from labour, capital and income towards the use of natural resources should be considered, stated a policy paper distributed at a recent CSD meeting.

Technology transfer and the concomitant intellectual property rights issue have proved to be only slightly less difficult. Workshops held in Norway and another held in Colombia jointly sponsored by the United States provided numerous options. These included clearing-houses, referral services, exchange programmes, 'one-stop shops', build-operate-transfer schemes and technology rights banks. But first more research and development is needed when it comes to pinpointing environmentally sound technologies.

One quick solution, according to Abaza, would be providing appropriate technology in place of aid money. 'So much aid comes in the form of technology, which worked in the donor nation but collapse in the developing world after a year or two,' Abaza said. 'That has happened for various reasons. Either it was the wrong

technology to begin with or it wasn't properly supported with necessary training and maintenance services. It's like a heart or a lung transplant. It can easily be rejected.'

Many governments and NGOs from the developed world cite political corruption as a barrier to a breakthrough on not only technology transfer but other economic and environmental reforms. But others, such as Abaza, counter those arguments.

'Sure there is corruption but it works both ways,' he says. 'It is just as corrupt for developed nations to give aid and say it must be spent on A, B or C — all of which will benefit companies from the donor nation.'

### The treaty ratified

21 December 1993 marked an historic day in the aftermath of Rio. On that day the 50th ratification of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was received at the United Nations Headquarters in New York and allowed the treaty to go into effect in March 1994. But the problems of implementation have become all too clear.

There was a general agreement at an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) meeting held in February this year that there is a need for further reduction of greenhouse gases than that already called for in the treaty.

The meeting in February basically answered the question of whether the treaty needs to be strengthened, said Scott Hajost, an international attorney with the American-based Environmental Defence Fund. 'Now the debate begins of how and when.'

In Europe, where nations pushed for cutbacks to greenhouse gases in the pre-Rio days, the treaty has yet to be ratified due to disagreements between northern and southern European nations on burden-sharing. Also a proposed European Union (EU) carbon tax has fallen by the wayside after the British Government dug in its heels and rebuffed an otherwise unanimous European Union Council of Ministers. Despite that failure, Danish Environment Minister Seven Auken, whose Government has led the fight for a EU carbon tax, says the battle over the carbon tax is not finished. 'It has to happen,' says Auken. 'It is just a matter of time.'

Across the Atlantic Ocean,



UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME UNEP

the subject of an energy tax has proved just as difficult. Despite a proposal by United States President Bill Clinton for a so-called BTU tax, which the administration decided on in order to distribute the burden of energy reduction on all sources, as opposed to only fossil fuel, was rejected by the United States Congress. Politicians and lobbyists from American oil-producing states such as Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas played a major role in the bill's defeat.

In Rio and afterwards more than 165 nations signed the Convention for Biological Diversity. The treaty went into force on 29 December 1993 after the required 30 ratifications were received by the United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

### Division among the parties

As with the Climate Change Convention, an October meeting of the INC — in preparation for the first meeting of the parties to be held in December — outlined numerous issues that have divided the parties. A few of these revolve around a possible protocol on biotechnology to regulate genetically modified

organisms. Again, technology transfer, intellectual property rights and funding are nettlesome questions that are as much unanswered as they

forth demands for a Desertification Convention.

Whatever comes of the final treaty — and certainly now money is not likely — it has become obvious that the scope and seriousness of the problem of desertification is still not understood. Western media has been rife with reports about the 'myth of desertification'. Unlike ozone depletion or climate change, which are concepts now rooted in public perception, most assume desertification is an African problem involving nations on the fringe of the Sahara Desert. 'This is despite the fact that it is a worldwide land degradation problem with more than 900 million people at risk,' says Franklin Cardy, who heads UNEP's Desertification Unit.

### A stunning success

Most international experts, who have followed the UNCED process and the post-Rio progress, agree there is one stunning success that has emerged from Rio. This is NGO participation in the process.

Despite getting their foot in the UNCED and now the CSD door, many NGOs admit they too have had a difficult time making a post-Rio transition.

'Now that the international community is calling for practical case studies of substance on such issues as sustainable agriculture, management of toxic wastes, changing consumption patterns, and human habitats, the same NGOs who worked with the UNCED process are not necessarily the ones to deliver the goods,' said Mike McCoy, with the United States Citizens Network.

### Encouragement from grass roots groups

Strong could not agree more: 'If there is one encouraging sign since Rio, it is the way grassroots groups at the local level around the world have taken the Rio spirit and adopted their own Agenda 21 plans,' says Strong. 'I just hope that enthusiasm and concern eventually work their way up the system and push governments into the action that is so desperately needed.'

Much of the task of monitoring and cajoling governments into action falls into the court of the CSD. While most academics, NGOs and others refrain from grading the work of the CSD to date, most agree that the 1994 session will go a long way in determining just how effective it will be.

Will governments, via the CSD, be able to take off their national hats and work for the common good of the planet? asks Curtis. 'That is what it really all comes down to.'

— Our Planet

## Healthy Sanitation and Environmental Conservation

by Qazi Mahbubul Hasan

THE outbreak of cholera and other water-borne diseases could not be fully stopped through water supply only, hygienic sanitation should also be ensured along with. About 90 per cent people are enjoying safe water facilities but only 33 per cent of the population has access to sanitary latrine, said Dr A M S Hoque, Project Director (SO-CMOB), DPHE. He was speaking as chief guest in a national workshop titled 'Role of Partner NGOs in Social Mobilization for Sanitation' organized by NGO Forum for Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation, in Lalmaia on May 31, 1994.

Dr TV Luong, Sanitation Coordinator of UNICEF and Fariduddin Ahmed Mia, Superintending Engineer, DPHE were present as special guests. In the inaugural session Jeffrey S Pereira presided. The concept-paper was presented by S M A Rashid, Director, NGO Forum, Qazi Mahbubul Hasan, Information Officer, NGO Forum also spoke on the occasion.

Dr Luong said that one of the main reasons of environmental pollution is unhygienic sanitation condition. Environmental conservation cannot be possible without hygienic sanitation facilities. She also added that the achievement of NGO Forum which came through social mobilization encouraged many.

Fariduddin Ahmed opined that our social responsibility was to motivate people for healthy sanitation. Along with the government, continuous efforts of the NGOs in sanitation promotion will lead the nation towards success. He also noted that there were two major responsibilities for the development in the living conditions of human beings; one was promotion of hygienic sanitation and the other, employment generation.

Jeffrey S Pereira in his Chairperson's speech articulated that apparently it might be that there was no insufficiency of water but practically it is far from being even nearly enough. In the northern parts of the country 30 per cent tubewells had become inoperative. Massive problem came into being in the area of public health due to improper sanitation conditions. He added that people get attacked by worms for their unawareness. If that can be prevented 11 per cent food grains will be surplus.

S M A Rashid in his keynote address mentioned that in the DPHE-UNICEF initiated national programme on Social Mobilization for Sanitation the NGOs were identified as potential partners. He added that primary health care, where sanitation was a basic component, had been taken as the key strategy to achieve the national goal: Health for All by 2000. He said that nationwide campaign had been launched by NGO Forum to motivate people and to provide sanitation facilities in every household in 10 diarrhoea-prone areas of the country by the year 1995.

Mahbubul Hasan in his speech mentioned that the challenge of the present was sanitation promotion. He hoped that all concerned would come forward to help combat this challenge.

The workshop was conducted in a participatory manner. The participants through

their active participation identified some major problems in executing the social mobilization process, they also have some recommendations to resolve those problems.

### The major problems as identified were:

Lack of coordination among various agencies, inadequate development communication and ineffective information flow, lack of appropriate technology and lack of women's participation in the sanitation programme.

For resolving these problems the recommendations were: to develop an effective coordination mechanism between GOs and NGOs, implementing the sanitation laws strictly, educate people by providing appropriate technology.

At the end of the workshop S M A Rashid, Director, NGO Forum articulated that NGO Forum will provide all out co-operation to its partner organization in implementing social mobilization programme.

ECONOMIC growth has always been measured by changes in the Gross National Product (GNP). The price of goods and services bought and sold in the market place is considered to be the standard of value used to compute GNP. Net National Product (NNP) is another well known measurement of national income which is simply GNP minus the amount of capital used up in the course of the production of GNP. These measurements provide us with the information of goods and services produced in a country over a period of time. They can be used for comparison of economic prosperity over time and between countries. They are also used as an indicator of standard of living in a country (e.g. UNDP's Human Development Index).

However, national income accounts are limited mostly to market determined values since they include commodities bought and sold in the market. Therefore, many non-marketed goods and services remain outside the national income accounts.

One classic example is the activities performed by

## Accounting for the Environment

by Fahmida Akter

*... a tree left standing in a national park is not counted in the GNP. But when it is cut and sold as lumber in the market it is measured as an increase in the GNP. The tree may be worth much, more to society as a tree than as lumber, but that does not matter. If it is accounted for only when it is sold as a marketable commodity, when it has a price in the market. The inherent value is ignored.*

housewives in the households like collecting fuel wood, fetching water, rearing children. Also value of a park or a lake remain outside the accounts. The effect of environmental degradation, pollution and waste disposal cannot always be captured by market based information. So these phenomena are not reflected in the conventional accounts.

Another important limitation is that they do not discriminate between costs and benefits. So they provide no way of determining net changes in social welfare. Pollution caused by economic activity does not decrease national income as measured by the conventional accounts.

In fact, if society has to spend money to restore the

environment, these expenditures also increase GNP in the existing system. They do so in the same way that the production of food increases it. Or a tree left standing in a national park is not counted in the GNP. But when it is cut and sold as lumber in the market it is measured as an increase in the GNP. The tree may be worth much, more to society as a tree than as lumber, but that does not matter. It is accounted for only when it is sold as a marketable commodity, when it has a price in the market. The inherent value is ignored. Similarly national income goes up when a forest is cleared for infrastructural development. The latter is considered as capital formation but the loss of forest is not

recorded as capital consumption in the account.

Natural capital eg stock and quality of air and water, open space, wildlife, natural beauty are not marketed but contribute substantially to society's welfare. Amenity losses suffered as a result of the production of market goods should properly be entered as costs of production. So any environmental damage that occurs should be valued and deducted from the GNP. Man-made capital depreciation is deducted from GNP to obtain NNP. This is a better measurement of well being because it allows for the fact that some of the wealth from which GNP flows is subject to decay. But NNP ignores natural wealth. Natural wealth is also subject to de-

preciation which is occurred by running down reserves of oil or reducing the standing stock of forest. National accounts are distorted as they include one form of depreciation and ignore the other.

The deficiencies of the conventional accounts to the extent of ignoring the depletion of natural capital have caught the attention of environmentalists as well as various international organization. A number of OECD countries have taken initiatives to compile accounts on natural resource stocks and changes in the stocks. Attempts have also been taken for accounting the environment in the developing countries eg, Indonesia, Costa Rica, the Philippines, Mexico, Papua New Guinea.

Bangladesh is a country where massive poverty and high population density lead to land clearing, inappropriate cultivation practice, tree-cutting, over-fishing, overgrazing etc which cause deforestation and water pollution, land degradation and rapid depletion of the natural resources. If this trend continues the development of the economy will be jeopardised while sustainability of the economy will be a far cry. The situation calls for a practical policy aimed at economic development without degrading the environment.

Of course, a comprehensive and detailed accounting of the environment is complex and costly in practice. A feasible alternative is to publish a separate set of resource accounts which show, in non-monetary units, just what is happening to the resources in a country. Such accounts exist in France and Norway. More modest modifications can be made to sets of environmental statistics published in most developed economies but which are rare in the developing world. The main objective is the need to show how changes in environmental variables are linked to changes in the economy. This will at least help us understand that the economy and environment are not unrelated. This will make us realise that growth is not free. We tend to think that goods are created from nothing and once their benefits are taken they vanish to nothingness once more. But for every growth there is a cost; in any growth-process, the value of additional benefits declines as the costs of obtaining them rise.

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## Aftab Choudhury: A Unique Lover of Trees

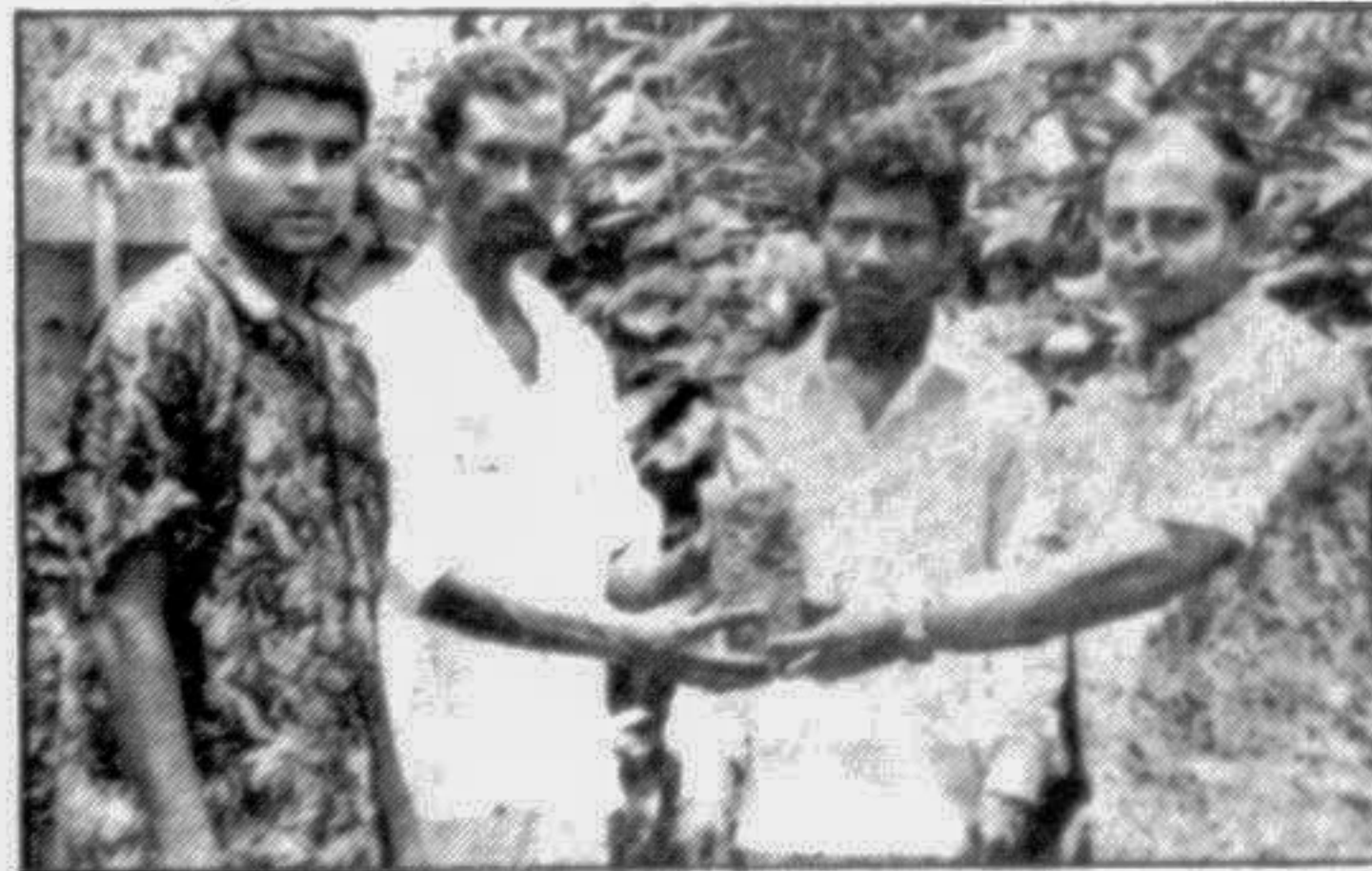
by M H Khan

*He plants trees on public and private campuses, hospitals and office grounds, private houses and at road-sides. He has developed a nursery of his own. He produces saplings in his own nursery and also collects from other nurseries. He often ventures out for his routine schedule almost every day during the planting season, with his private car loaded with saplings and manure. He approaches the public and the private authorities and house-owners to allow him to plant trees at his own cost.*

says a tree lover, 'I mean necessity and continuous work to this end.' He is Mr Aftab Choudhury, a prominent journalist and columnist and a social worker of Sylhet. He writes valuable articles in local and national newspapers. He reports on tree-plantation programmes of government and non-government organisations; but he never publicises himself or ask the press to so publicise or to eulogize him for his having planted thousands of trees and undertaking the marathon task of upkeeping the plants till they grow to the size of being capable to protect themselves.

He plants trees on public and private campuses, hospitals and office grounds private

houses and at road-sides. He has developed a nursery of his own. He produces saplings in his own nursery and also collects from other nurseries. He often ventures out for his routine schedule almost every day during the planting season, with his private car loaded with saplings and manure. He approaches the public and the private authorities and house-owners to allow him to plant trees at his own cost in their land. He urges them to protect the planted trees and he frequently visits to see for himself that the trees do not die away for lack of care. During subsequent visits he replaces the faded or damaged saplings, and where necessary he applies manure. He does all these



A tree lover, Aftab Choudhury (far right) distributing hundreds of saplings in different institutions and clubs in Sylhet at his own expense.

work by his own hand with the help of an employee whom he has trained for the work and to whom he is always loving and affectionate.

Mr Choudhury approaches the Imams of mosques, requests them to advise the people to take saplings from the mosque on Fridays after the Jumma prayers and he contributes a large number of saplings at the disposal of

Imams procured from his own nursery as well as by purchasing with his own money from other nurseries. He works unnoticed and avoids publicity. He spends the lion's share of his income in this way. At the beginning he started alone. But now there are some others, especially his friends, who help him silently in his work providing him with saplings, manure and fencing materials

It need not be mentioned that we need individuals like Aftab Choudhury to come forward with love for trees to launch a country-wide afforestation movement.

To maintain balance of the environment, it is necessary that at least 25 per cent of the total land of a country be covered by forest. But in our country we are doing precisely the opposite. On the one hand, we are destroying forests and on the other, we are not compensating the loss by creating new forests. The result is that the area covered by forests in our country has been reduced now to 9 per cent from a 16 per cent forest-cover a few years back. The dwindling forests must be contained by growing more and more trees and creating new forests. The problem is also linked with that of the over-growth of population in that the two are intertwined and must be balanced together through the spread of education and mass awareness. God knows, that in a time like this we need more men like Mr Choudhury who believes strongly in the motto that without a sound environment we can never hope to live in a sound universe.