

A Communicative Visit

Rounding up its visit to Bangladesh, the high-level Japanese trade team had a number of good things — not platitudes — to say about the country, particularly about its macro-economic performance, but not equally matching favourable words about the investment climate here. The present rate of inflation and foreign exchange reserve position in Bangladesh provide a good basis for further economic growth, according to Kazuo Haruna, leader of the 40-member delegation which concluded some "effective, and fruitful" discussions with government officials and chamber leaders here. But the leader of the Keidanren economic study mission raised the most pertinent issue: whether foreign investors will feel encouraged to invest where local investors were fighting shy to do so in their own country.

Evidently the Japanese team leader has a point and something has to be urgently done to allay that concern of the foreign investors. There is no refuting the point that the local people with money must set the precedence. Until now this has not happened in a big way. But this is not the only stumbling-block the leader of the Japanese delegation has identified. In fact, there are others: bureaucratic tangle or red-tapism, some inadequacies in the infrastructure and customs and other regulation.

The Japanese delegation chief said in so many words that an on-going democracy is a good thing by itself no doubt; but since foreign investment is a long-term, processive affair, they cannot be unkind of the troughs that politics occasionally goes through, with strikes etc, as well any lack of consistency or continuity in government's policies.

The delegation leader has been quick to point out the lack of adequate relations between private sectors of the two countries. At the government level the ties are rather close and he lamented why the same was not true about the private sectors as well. One answer may be a lack of promotional activities matching with the high expectations of investment nurtured. The Japanese investment is shifting its destination from one area to the other. But so far Bangladesh has failed to attract it simply because there hasn't been enough of a projection of the country in Japan as a prospective place for investment.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's visit to Japan made things move between the two countries but to actually harvest the benefits of the process, set in motion, there is a need for preparation of the ground. We should think the opposition leader's visit to Japan contributed its mite to the overall impression formed there. The government's efforts need to be complemented further by some other measures on the home front, including perhaps a political sideshow, albeit in an atmosphere of reciprocity. The issues the Japanese trade delegation has raised as a representative body from a friendly country cannot be brushed aside.

The trade wings of our diplomatic missions abroad have not done the job they were expected to do. Like the Japanese, others will be keen to invest here only when our own promotional efforts and home work have been radically improved.

Plant a Tree and Nurture it

Yesterday was the first of Ashadh—*Ashadh* *pratham* *divasa* as the doyen of subcontinental poets has celebrated it some sixteen hundred years ago. It was an act of the imaginative on the part of whoever set the government's tree plantation fortnight to begin this day. Weather which is local does not always keep its appointments but the macrocosmic climate does. The earth rejuvenates every rainy season and it settles in our climes on the first of Ashadh — give or take a day or a week or two. A successful plantation fortnight is one of our best bets against unrelenting dissipation of the life supporting gifts of our environment. How?

If about a million trees can be planted each day over the whole span of the fortnight, nature surely would respond even as a mother does to her disconsolate child. This is not in fact so daunting a figure as it would seem at first. Let us forget about the more than 20 million families in the land most of which do not have a plot of land to plant a tree. But government offices together with educational institutions each having ample space all to their own should number anything beyond a hundred thousand. For them all to plant an average of 140 trees during this half-month is no tall order. What is indeed far more important than the actual planting of the trees is the surge it will create in the society at large. The plantation work would surely sow in the mind of the hundreds of thousands of young scholars a love for trees and nature.

The problem with massive plantation campaigns is first corruption and secondly the knotty job of nurture. How many trees would government agencies plant directly and at what cost? The first figure could be deceptive. And the bill may well be paid for the false figure although each tree truly planted normally leaves quite a sum of income. The problem of nurture is more challenging than that of corruption perhaps. Who looks after the trees just planted? If somehow there is a provision for it somewhere the persons so charged would require to be tree-friendly, not as a one-time ritual but on a continuing basis. In more organised nations specialists in horticulture and arboriculture etc do the job with love and a spirit of pride and competition, why can't that be done here?

Mention must be made with a sense of gratitude here of the yeoman service being rendered on this front by a number of NGOs. Over a vast tract of Gopalganj—reduced to sand dunes by the all enveloping waters of '88 — the landscape has changed from stark grey to a deep green, thanks to some NGOs thinking up the idea of paying women in grains for their constant care of the planted trees in their charge. As a part of the fundamentalists' rejection of the activity of the NGOs newly growing trees are being felled in their thousands specially in the northern districts. Government is yet to move to thwart and punish them.

There are encouraging signs all around of people in general coming round to loving the trees and wanting to have them more and more. The plantation campaign should continue round the year with success. And to supplement it — felling of trees should be made punishable by law and the ban on burning wood in the brickfield kilns should be enforced effectively.

As a member of the UN Observer Team, I watched the general election in South Africa, the first all-race democratic election even to be held in that country. It was indeed a historic occasion. Eyes and ears of the world were focussed on South Africa. I was in South Africa from 19th April to 2nd May, 1994 when the counting was still going on. When I arrived at Johannesburg on 19th April, 1994 political tension and uncertainty were very much in evidence following decision made by the Inkatha Party led by Buthelezi representing the Zulu tribe, the largest one in South Africa to boycott the election. This was alarming against the backdrop of continued violence which engulfed South Africa during the last few years. I was told that South Africa was already classified to be the most violent country. I was further informed that all areas in South Africa should be considered as risk areas but some areas were more dangerous than others and that one should take every precaution before leaving the hotel since mugging and thefts were very common.

Soon after my arrival a positive development took place. The Zulu-dominated Inkatha Freedom Party at the last moment reversed their earlier stand and decided to participate in the elections thus paving the way for peaceful election. Earlier a high-powered international mediation team which included Henry Kissinger and Lord Carrington had failed to persuade Mr Buthelezi, leader of the Inkatha Party to participate and the international team left in disgust. A member of the team, a former Kenyan diplomat Professor Okumu stayed behind on his own and started his personal mediation. He persuaded Buthelezi to come to a compromise which I believe was influenced largely by the King of the Zulu tribe with whom Nelson Mandela had an excellent rapport. Former President de Klerk also put considerable pressure on Buthelezi to compromise. The last minute decision of Inkatha party to participate in the election had a dramatic and positive effect and violence subsided considerably.

For South Africa the election marked the end of 342 years of White rule, for Africa it meant the final liberation of that continent and for the world it meant the collapse of institutional racism.

Thus, South Africa's first democratic election was one of the most closely watched and carefully monitored elections in history. For the first time in South Africa all citizens of 18 years of age or above were entitled to vote. Each voter was entitled to cast two ballots — one for the National and the other for Provincial. According to proportional system of representation for the National Assembly 400 seats were allotted on the basis of four seats for every one person. Voters voted for the party and not the candidates and the party symbol along with the picture of the leader was put on the ballot paper.

Protracted negotiations involving multi-party groups finally succeeded by end of November, 1993 to produce a package of draft laws subsequently approved by the Parliament which became the guidelines for the transition to democracy. The bills adopted by the Parliament were (a) Transitional Executive Council Act, (b) Electoral Act, (c) Independent Electoral Commission Act, (d) Independent Media Commission Act and Independent Broadcasting Authority Act.

Parliament also adopted an Interim Constitution which came in force on 27th April, 1994 and would remain in force for two years during which a new Constitution is to be adopted by the National Assembly, sitting as a Constitutional Assembly. Transitional Executive Council made up of one representative of each of the parties participating in the Negotiating Council was intended to create a "level playing field" for South Africa's first democratic election. Transitional Executive Council (TEC) formed seven sub-councils, namely, Regional and Local Government, Law and Order, Stability and Security, Defence, Finance, Foreign Affairs, and Intelligence. The sub-councils were designed to ensure that actions taken by the

government would facilitate rather than hinder the transition to democracy. It was further agreed that TEC would cease once the cabinet of the newly elected government takes office after the April election which has now taken place.

Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) was given all responsibility for organising administration and monitoring the Electoral Code of Conduct binding on all political parties. IEC would also have the ultimate responsibility to certify the election free and fair.

Independent Media Commission and the Independent Broadcasting Authorities were responsible to ensure equitable treatment of all political parties in media and broadcast.

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South Africa Re-born

by Fakhruddin Ahmed

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producing his or her identity document or a temporary voter card. There was no electoral roll or register as such.

The electoral code of conduct was binding on all registered political parties including their leaders, candidates, members, armed forces and supporters through out the election period. The code is a comprehensive set of rules governing the election seeking to promote "a climate of democratic tolerance in which political activity may take place without fear of coercion, intimidation or reprisals."

Provision was made for State Electoral Fund administered by the Independent Election Commission. Its purpose was defined as to provide financial assistance to qualified political parties to enable them to conduct their electoral campaigns more effectively. Grants were to be made in two stages: half before the election and half afterwards. Provision was made to make payment to parties in proportion to their popular vote.

Through protracted negotiations it was decided that the government for the next five years would be a national coalition government and the number of cabinet posts will be restricted to 27. The formula

adopted was as follows: Party with highest number of votes will nominate for the post of President. Every party securing 80 seats in the National Assembly of 400 can have the right to nominate an Executive Vice President. Parties with at least 5% of the vote can claim the post of a Minister. Thus the interim constitution already agreed contains notions of a government of national unity and proportional representation into all levels of the state, not just in Parliament, but in the cabinet. The Vice Presidencies, in Parliamentary Committees and Provincial Legislatures. For the protection of citizens from human rights abuses the constitution provides — full Bill of Rights.

On the election day allegations of cheating, irregularities

are stern rebuke to cynics of the world.

The most formidable challenges that the new government will have to tackle are the need to generate a huge number of new employment opportunities and the need for internal development to meet popular expectation. Apart from unemployment which is about 40% among the black population other priorities would be housing, electricity and water supplies. On the other hand, there is solid base for building up a healthy economy. Agriculture is in good shape. Inflation has declined for the first time after two decades. South Africa which is very rich in mining like gold, diamond, coal and iron with a sound banking system and infrastructure offers new opportunities to local and foreign investors under a stable government to participate more vigorously to sustain the economic growth and consequently generate more jobs, houses and decent standard of living for all. The National Economic Forum which was formed during the dialogue among the parties and the government is one demonstration of national consensus underlying the practical need for business, labour and government to work together in matter of national economy and its management. It is expected that the Forum in one form or another would continue to operate and advise the new government.

The notion of coalition government, proportional representation at all levels, consensus on management of economy, Independent Broadcasting Authority are all very much relevant and worth studying in the context of Bangladesh.

The Weekly Mail and Guardian of South Africa in its issue of April 22 to 28, 1994 commented, "Next week's election signals the fall of the last bastion of racist rule. The world is watching with fascination as this nation plays out the grand finale of 20th century institutional racism, providing the extraordinary spec-

convoys sent from Pakistan has made a significant difference, by levelling out prices around the divided city. It is paid for by the World Food Programme of the UN, but coordinated and distributed by the ICRC and other non-governmental organisations. Heavy sacks of flour, 90 kilograms in weight, are shifted across the city on simple wooden pushcarts, often accompanied by four or more members of a family. Some have become petty traders, planning to sell flour or sugar for a small profit in other parts of Kabul. They include former civil servants, schoolteachers, technicians and policemen, who currently have no jobs. Frequently the victims of cross-fire, the civilian population, must also satisfy the greed of the armed fighters at many checkpoints whenever they go around the city. Bribes to pass through the checkpoints are routine. No pity is being shown to brutal war of attrition. There is much bitterness among civilians at the treatment they are receiving from the armed groups. Even among those who initially welcomed the downfall of the Moscow-backed government of Mohammed Najibullah in April 1992, the sheer lawlessness of the gunmen has led to alienation and anger. — GEMINI NEWS

Away from the TV Cameras, the Agony of Afghans Continues

Anthony Hyman writes from Kabul

Afghanistan, a battle ground for superpowers for much of the 1980s, continues to be ravaged by various armed gangs, controlling swathes of territory. In Kabul there is virtually no government and the city's infrastructure is breaking down.

Afghanistan



newer areas of Soviet-built apartment blocks, have also suffered great damage, but Khairkhana and some other areas are relatively unscathed, suffering only stray rocket attacks. Air raids over Kabul have ceased because of earlier losses of war planes and the

increasing risks of flying un-serviced, unworthy planes. — Despite severe difficulties a small number of experts, expatriates as well as Afghans, are helping to maintain the city's essential services. In Kabul, as in other cities, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) stands

out as a remarkably well organized operation giving humanitarian help to thousands of victims of war.

The largest of Kabul's hospitals are functioning through the dedication of teams of Afghan doctors and nurses. Vital medicines, bandages and medical equipment are all provided by the ICRC, along with salaries.

Many hospital beds are filled with wounded fighters from opposed sides — though doctors never ask to which party they are affiliated.

The hospitals are keeping strictly neutral in this senseless power struggle which is steadily destroying what is left of Kabul.

The savage destruction of Kabul resulted in hundreds of thousands of refugees quitting for safer places, like Jalalabad to the south, where at least there is no fighting. But large numbers of homeless people still remain, often because they can not afford the cost of the ride.

Many public buildings of Kabul, schools and mosques alike, have been appropriated to house displaced families from destroyed areas. In the north of the city 50,000 refugees are sheltered in this way. They are living in terribly crowded conditions, often three families to one room.

As a consequence education at all levels has come to a standstill in the capital. Refugees fill the schools and the teachers sit idle.

Higher education courses ended two years ago, and the campus of Kabul University itself is under occupation by fighters of Hizb-i-Wahdat, the powerful Shi'a party which controls a considerable stretch of the capital.

Besides the 50,000 refugees occupying public buildings, an estimated 300,000 more Kabulites have managed to take shelter with their relatives elsewhere in the city.

Says Peter Stocker of the ICRC delegation in Kabul: "They are perhaps not in danger of starvation, but if the blockade continues, the situation risks becoming unbearable."

Bread is the staple food for most Kabulites. Flour prices have risen rapidly since January 1, when the latest round of fighting erupted.

Food became a weapon in the struggle, when Hizb-i-Islami fighters began preventing flour and other supplies reaching people living in areas of the capital controlled by the government forces.

Since April, though, a steady flow of flour in food

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.

"Blackmen" and crime

Sir, On June 7 The Daily Star carried an item from its Sylhet correspondent regarding the shooting death of a Bangladesh taxi driver in the US. The item described the assailant as a "blackman" and used this word twice.

By making a point of describing him as a "blackman" (instead of using, say, the word "assailant"), the reporter has, perhaps unwittingly, made an issue of the assailant's color too. Some people reading this news item may now associate all black people with crime in the US. In fact, among many a returning Bengali immigrant, a common refrain is, "Those kallas (blackies) are good at nothing but stealing." A portion

of the black underclass in big US cities is involved in violent crime — but this is a function of their economic condition, not of their "blackness".

Recently there was a letter in a section of local vernacular press about two Bengalis in Korea getting drunk and attacking a local woman. Some of the poorer Bangladeshis now in the US have formed street gangs in New York's Queens area and sometimes pick fights with Spanish-speaking gangs. Infighting among Bengali organizations in New York is also common. I am sure we would not appreciate it if people looked at these incidents and generalized to say, "All Bengalis are drunk" or "Bengalis are mean minded", etc. Generalizations such as "These kallas will not work if

Budget and MPs

Sir, In a scorching afternoon heat of June 9th, 1994 Finance Minister Saifur Rahman placed before the half-empty but fully-airconditioned parliament building our national budget for the fiscal year 1994-95 showing a revenue income of Taka 13,637 crore, revenue expenditure of Taka 9948 crore and Taka 11,000 crore annual development programme with an overall deficit of Taka 8095 crore and foreign debt liabilities of 13 billion US dollars. The Cabinet in a meeting held on the same day approved the revenue and

development budget for the year 1994-95.

Contrary to the democratic norms, parliamentary practice and constitutional provision many of our opposition MPs in the parliament boycotted the budget session. They vehemently criticised the budget and said "with the entire opposition staying outside parliament it is a mere ruling party affair".

We are very shocked and disappointed as to why the MPs of the opposition parties did not attend the budget session in the parliament. If the Members of the Parliament don't attend the budget session who would attend it? What are the obligations, functions and duties of the MPs and what is the use and justification of our national parliament?

We wonder if the Members of our Parliament do not take care of our national parliament and our parliamentary democracy then who would take care of these? What would happen to our national assembly and democracy?

Nowhere in a civilised and democratic country the mem-

bers of the parliament try to belittle or make fun of the happenings inside a national parliament as some of our members of parliament do from time to time. In foreign countries members of parliaments walk out in protest or resign from their parliamentary seats. But in our case some members abstain from attending the parliament or boycott the parliament on the one hand and draw their pay and allowances from the public exchequer regularly, on the other hand. What a pitiable situation!

Our country has produced many great parliamentarians in 1930's, 1940's, 1950's and 1960's like A K Fazlul Huq, H S Suhrawardy, etc. They often had very bitter relations with the government. They attacked the government policies and programmes, staged walk-outs from the parliament and left no stone unturned to foil the 'evil' designs of the government by democratic means but they never boycotted the national parliament for an indefinite period.

Today, we are a free, inde-

pendent and sovereign country. Can't the members of our 5th parliament follow in the footsteps of our great parliamentarians and help grow democracy for the sake of peace, progress and political stability in the country?

O H Kabir
Dhaka.

South Africa

Sir, The dismantling of apartheid in South Africa after 46 years of bloody struggle is indeed an epoch-making development. I am greatly pleased in witnessing the end of apartheid in South Africa. Now Nelson Mandela has become the leader of the free and democratic South Africa. I take this opportunity to extend my heartiest congratulations to President Nelson Mandela and the people of South Africa. We wish him and his compatriots all success in building a happy and prosperous South Africa.

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