

An Economic Update

It comes as a revelation that fiscal 1993-94 has closed with an ADP utilisation rate which is ten per cent higher than the figure for the year before. The benchmark year was not by itself a successful one in terms of development output, so that the bettering of the record of that year by some percentage points in 1993-94 is not something to be overjoyed with.

It would strike one as a feat though when it is considered that a mid-term review of last year's ADP implementation had depicted a very bleak picture with the bottom-line reading that Herculean efforts were needed in the remaining six months to make up for the lag in meeting the physical targets. It seems the desperate thrust to improve upon the situation came after all. However, a detailed break-down of implementation will be appreciated because it can provide guidance for clearing backlogs in the future.

Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman made the disclosure before an assemblage of Aid Group representatives of the World Bank, IMF, ADB, UNDP and the envoys of the USA, Japan, Canada, Australia, Sweden, Norway, EEC and the Netherlands in Dhaka — one would think appropriately — as they were the ones intermittently voicing concern over poor rates of ADP implementation.

We have come to know that high utilisation of the domestic resource upto 91 per cent of the total allocation of 2.45 billion US dollars in last year's ADP has made possible the 'satisfactory' outcome. This naturally beefs up the argument against occasional donor suggestions that the tax base be broadened and the utility rates raised to scrape more money to our purse. Since the availability of domestic resource has increased by virtue of collection of revenues we do not stand in need of widening or deepening the tax base at the moment — seems to be the Finance Minister's line of thinking. That is why he makes out a case for maximising collection under the existing VAT net rather than expanding its coverage which seems to be preferred by the IMF representative. But we are for rationalising VAT collection so that the escapes from it do not increase the burden on others.

Already our lowering of the tariff structure ahead of the other countries in the region has come under fire internally for very justified reasons. We have liberalised our market at the expense of the local industries which needed protection for some more time. This has virtually thrown open our market for the regional countries without any commensurate access gained to their markets.

While our exports declined by 15 per cent during the last quarter of fiscal 1993-94, imports into the country dropped by only one per cent in the same period. This serves as an eye-opener to the imbalance in foreign trade. And it is said that trade accelerates development five times more than foreign aid. But, of course, we cannot adopt a black and white approach to export and import. If the imports are production-oriented capital goods, raw materials and intermediate goods rather than a deluge of consumerist items then they should be worthwhile. Are we keeping a tab on this?

Why Polygamy?

The number of polygamous men in the country is rising at an alarming rate. So alarming is the trend towards polygamy that over a period of just 10 years between 1981 and 1991 the polygamous men have doubled. According to a Depthnews feature estimate carried in a Bangla daily the number of men taking more than one wife was 1,74,000, which increased to 730,000 in 1981 and by the year 1991 the number shot up to 1,400,000. Providing the statistics the report makes a small comment that the actual number might be even higher because not everyone marrying several times is likely to give the correct information. We wish we could agree more with this observation.

As one scholar believes — and there is hardly any ground to contradict him — the tendency of polygamy is on the rise in the poor segment of our population. But when he detects the lack of entertainment as the primary cause of such marriage, we cannot help differing from his views. We however fully agree with the observation that men find it convenient to take a number of wives in the absence of a hard and fast rule to take the responsibility of the growing families. Taking an undue advantage of the religious sanction, men can take several wives — upto four — at a time. But some go on a marriage spree, skirting around the sanctions.

What remains untold is that each of these marriage maniacs is a lecher and some of them have conveniently combined their sexual predilection with material gains that come their way through each new marriage. But what a way of increasing the overall population of the country! And also what a waste! The abandoned women and children are simply deprived of the basic human care needed for them to grow up as the worthy citizens of the land. Either they add to the existing huge number of beggars or to all kinds of anti-social elements.

Women constitute 48.6 per cent of the total population. If 6.5 per cent of the men tie their nuptial chords more than once, does it mean that some of them have to pass their lives as confirmed bachelors? Not necessarily. The impression on the other hand is that more ribble girls than eligible bachelors seem to be waiting in the wings for their turn to start a family. If we go by the theory of demand and supply, it is evident that young men rather than the opposite sex are more in demand. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain the existence of a system like dowry — one that must be brought to the husband's family from the girl's parents, and also one that accounts for so much repression on women, sometimes even for their lives. If the cruelty, thanks to dowry, does not go to that extreme, it surely ends up in a severed marriage.

This is how the sexual balance in our society is maintained. But the evil of polygamy spews a sizable unwanted and dependent population. Unless this is strictly dealt with and religious provisions applied discreetly, the disparities between men and women, between different classes of society and between our population size and our means to feed them will continue to widen. That we cannot allow because it will be suicidal.

THE euphoria over the fall of communism and restoration of democracy during the late 1990s in Soviet Russia and Eastern Europe has, unfortunately, given way to despair and gloom. In Soviet Russia itself, feuds broke out among its ruins. After the unification of Germany, street gangs launched most ugly attacks on foreign immigrants there. The ugly outbreak of sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing operation in Bosnia, Somalia, Georgia, India and lately in Rwanda have brought to the fore a spasm of human nastiness. The terrible carnage that goes unchallenged with unrelenting savagery pities the human civilization and cultural advancement that the world leaders so proudly proclaim.

With the breakdown of authority in Eastern Europe people coalesced into national groups that communist governments had so long tried to suppress. The Serbs had been the dominant ethnic group in the Federal state of Yugoslavia but as the country was torn asunder and fell apart in two individual republics, the Serbs living outside Serbia in Bosnia

and Croatia, apprehending that

they would be driven out, used the military muscle of their ethnic allies in Belgrade to create a greater Serbia and thus 'ethnic cleansing' was born. The holocaust let loose by the Serbian army on the beleaguered Muslim population of Bosnia-Herzegovina reminds us of the brutality and repression unleashed on Bangladeshis in 1971 by the Pakistani occupation army. Hardly anything remains in Bosnia now. Houses, hospitals and churches are rubble. Trees stand charred and broken.

Today barbarism rules in the land which was once the most civilized part of Europe. Most worrisome and shocking as it may sound, Yugoslavia's troubles and aches are spilling over the borders and travelling from this country to other far away parts of the world like a terrible infectious disease. The very onset of political freedom has sent shock waves and rip-

ples of pain everywhere. No

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embracing democratic rules, that democracy can be a very messy business, especially in its early stages. One of its risks that evidently accompanies it is that political parties will divide along ethnic, tribal or religious lines, fomenting antagonism, instead of building compromise.

Taking the case of East European countries and USSR, we see that after years of life in a police state, they suddenly found themselves with what amounts to no state at all.

People were haunted by a sense of economic insecurity tossed from a planned economy to a competitive one.

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springing from a fear of homelessness has caused all the upheavals in the countries

such as India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Nepal, Afghanistan and

Pakistan. The Hindu-Muslim carnage that started with the demolition of Babri Mosque in India in 1992, has not ceased yet.

Fundamentalism is gaining ground in all places stretching from Iran, Libya, India and

spills over the borders of these countries to the remotest Bangladesh. Communism has collapsed but the least desirable traits of communism still lives on. Convinced that theirs is the one true faith, the zealots feel utterly justified in persecuting and killing their neighbours in the name of God. Exactly this has happened in India. The charismatic leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party L K Advani does not eat meat and fish and leads a spartan life. But when it comes to building support for his Hindu revivalist BJP, Advani is a believer in non-sexual excess. That is what he had exactly done in Ayodhya by embarking

on a 'Chariot tour' in 1992 to whip up Hindu fervour for the BJP. And this holy march left a trail of Hindu-Muslim rioting taking a heavy toll of human lives from both the factions.

This religion-based fervour and passion have spilled over to Bangladesh and people in the name of religion have been fuelling the crisis in a way that tends to push the country on the crossroads of conflict causing concern to all and sundry.

Intellectuals all over the country bemoan this zealousness that burdens this beautiful land of Bangladesh with hatred, passion and last of all bloodshed — thwarting progress and development in the vital sectors like economy and literacy. Should we have to believe that despite so much of advancement and awakening the old human nature, the divisions — neighbour against neighbour, race against race — would continue to dominate over our

conscience. Events taking place all around the country raise doubts about whether we are getting any better at bridging these gaps. It is a common knowledge that authoritarian or dictatorial regimes sometimes stir up communal hatreds and sectarian passions in a bid to show that the country would crumble down under democratic rule. It so happened in Kenya where President D. Arap Moi had played on tribal rivalries to halt the process of political pluralism. The same tactics were followed in South Africa by investigating trouble between the two main black factions, the ANC and Inkatha.

But it should not be the case for a democratic government that has come to power through people's mandate. The recent trend of factionalism sweeping over the whole country brings to focus one thing very clearly — how such splits can fracture a young democracy. This surge of hatred and passion is gradually degenerating into a disorder. No wonder a fear has crept in and the edifice of reform built painstakingly over the last few years is threatened to collapse.

sador and a couple of discreet airport officials are all that is required and this rather naive and foolish woman will sink into the obscurity she deserves.

We have many more urgent and pressing problems to tackle — the parliamentary deadlock for one and, more importantly, the economy. So let us not waste any more time on these distractions. The real Bangladeshi feminists wherever they are (in social service organizations, the NGOs, the government, in politics) who are working so hard to put women's issues on the national agenda and share the burden of development equally with our male compatriots, have to accept the setback we have suffered and work quietly to restore confidence in technology, development and progress at the grassroots level.

The writer is Director, Centre for Analysis and Choice, Dhaka.

agitation in July-August last year.

A patch-up within the Nepali Congress Party could cool the simmering political cauldron, but looks unlikely at least for the moment. "It is a do-or-die situation," said Ganesh Man Singh in a local hospital where he was receiving treatment for a neck injury when Nepal's politics changed gear.

The Election Commission's task of organising the election is made difficult by poor transport and communications in the Himalayan kingdom. Voting will take place immediately after the monsoons, when roads and communication networks are often severed for days on end.

"We will do our best to ensure free and impartial elections," said Election Commissioner Bishnu Pratap Shah. "We will have to work hard for that."

Electoral costs are estimated at Rs300-400 million, a substantial amount in a country with an average annual per capita income of \$170.

"That's no excuse," says Narahari Acharya. "Once we have opted for democracy, we must be prepared to shoulder the costs of elections, which are an essential part of the governing system."

(Exchange rate: \$1 = 49 rupees).

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Does the Collapse of Communism and Cold War Give Rise to Fratricide and Ethnic Cleansing?

by Md Asadullah Khan

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Taslima Nasreen Affair : Quick Action Needed

by Yasmeen Murshed

paid to statements like that? The press might as well print the ravings heard at Speakers Corner in Hyde Park! Taslima Nasreen reminds me of the infant who repeats his newly learnt four-letter word at the family dining table not because he understands what it means but simply for the attention it gets him. Well, the good 'Dr Spock' told us to ignore the child and he would soon drop the word from his repertoire. Alas, the media has not followed this excellent advise and has created instead an 'enfant terrible'!

I am concerned not because the village moulin in Bangladesh is taking her seriously enough to issue 'fatwas' against her but because the press calls her a Bangladeshi 'feminist'. To many of us, she is Bangladeshi 'kook', as the Americans so quaintly put it —

not representative of any brand of feminism or indeed any other 'ism' that is found in the country except perhaps irrationalism! The bleeding heart liberals who espouse her cause do so at their own peril because her views are as extreme as that of any fundamentalist.

Thankfully most Bangladeshi continue to hold their

heads high, easy going views on life, love and the

hereafter: the Jamaat has dis-

associated itself from the 'fatwabaz' and the Nirmul Committee has declared its

distance from Taslima Nasreen!

It is now imperative for the

government to act firmly and

swiftly because there are not

too many options available. The

legalistic stand is that Taslima Nasreen should be accountable

under the laws of the land for

views expressed in public

which question the sanctity of

the beliefs of the majority of

her countrymen and if found

guilty she should be punished

to whatever extent that the

judge deems fit as he would in

any other case that he tried.

(Of course by the same token

action against the so-called

'fatwabaz' should be equally

swift and firm). Since the

government appears not to know

her whereabouts this will necessarily be a passive stand as

long as she remains in hiding

and the government will continue to face a difficult situation in the country. So why not

consider the expedient alter-

native — since the European

Union would like to have the

pleasure of looking after

Taslima Nasreen, why not let

them have her? To borrow a

phrase from school children

'GR to VR' which translates as

Good Riddance to Bad

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