Dhaka, Friday, July 29, 1994

An Appeal to AL

We would have made this plea even if our Foreign Minister did not. But since he has, we join with him. We appeal to the opposition Awami League (AL) that they should shift their half day strike to any day, other than on the two days -30 and 31 July - that the SAARC Foreign Ministers' meeting is scheduled to be held here in Dhaka. There is politics, and there is also concern for our country's image. There is nothing special as to why the AL should prefer Saturday to any other day for its half-day strike. Unless of course it was very much aware of the SAARC Foreign Ministers' meeting, and wanted to embarrass the government, by calling for a strike.

We know that the Awami League supports SAARC, and it has said so many times in its official pronouncements. We also know that it is as much interested in promoting regional co-operation as anybody else. We would like, therefore, to assume that it is an unfortunate coincidence that AL's strike call fell on the same day as that of SAARC Foreign Ministers' meeting. In the rush of things or while planning for its action programme, this unfortunate coincidence may have been overlooked. The other view is that the AL deliberately called for a programme that jeopardises the holding of the SAARC meeting. We do not have reasons to come to such a drastic conclusion about our biggest opposition party especially one that is so rich in its tradition of sacrifice and struggle for the creation of Bangladesh.

There is absolutely nothing to be gained politically by showing our SAARC neighbours that our political parties do not have that minimum sense of tolerance, or that slight mentality of accommodation which permits the country's foreign relations to proceed unhampered by the domestic compulsions. There is no doubt that our government will suffer an embarrassment in front of its SAARC partners if the strike programme is carried out on the planned day. But the question is, will it be an embarrassment just for the BNP government, and not for the country as a whole? The AL can take the view that the strike will prove to the SAARC partners that the present government is not in control of the affairs of the COUNTRY

But how does a half-day strike prove such a thing? Everyone knows, especially those who belong to this region, that a strike call can be implemented by any opposition party, at any time, in any of our capitals. Given our own separate experiences in each of the SAARC countries, we know what a strike means, and what its political significance is. More than anything else, AL's strike will prove to our neighbours, and to the world at large, that our political parties do not have even a minimum of commonality of interest, and that they do not have even a semblance of national feeling that helps them to distinguish things of partisan and of national interest. Keeping everything in mind, we reiterate our appeal to Awami League, especially since there is nothing special to be gained by it, to shift the date of its half-day strike, and hold it after the conclusion of SAARC meeting. Let us not forget that in the event that AL gets to power in the future the opposition parties at that time may opt for similar actions, again bringing embarrassment on the country as a whole, in trying to push forward partisan politics.

Adaptive Changes

Crystal ball gazing for Bangladesh is turning out to be something of an apparition. Yet we must persist in doing so far the sake of initiating adaptive changes so as not to be presented with a fait accompli.

We seem to be caught in two extremes of longterm vulnerability— one being the direction of technological, demographic, economic and social trends and the other lurking as rates of climatic and sea level changes. This is the bottom-line of a case study on Bangladesh in view of the muchtalked about global warming and greenhouse effeet, which Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad had thoughtfully organised with invaluable participation from scientists of national and international repute. The environmental and climatic research units of two universities from New Zealand and UK respectively having been pressed into service for the purpose, our own appetite for futuristic studies which we value so much is partially satiated. We want to see more of this to bolster the very rudimentary status of our information technology.

What is new that the study reveals? There will be more of rainfall, both in the monsoons and even in the winter, conjuring up the vision of diminished drought conditions and a plenty of water at the ground level for irrigation. Higher temperature despite increased water supply will benefit major crops at the expense of the Rabi variety which needs cooler atmosphere. The totality of impact will mean more of flooding while the rise of mercury is sure to make urban living rather excruciating with the heat stress.

But it is the coastal population who seem destined to be more adversely affected than the people inland because of the predicted rise in the sea-level. A latest report says that Urirchar, which made world headlines for the 1985 cyclone and became the focal-point of regional attention with the then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Pakistan President Ziaul Huq making very useful visits there, is going down to the sea. In another five years it may be entirely engulfed by the sea. Sandwip island having too peeled off by slides people had taken shelter in the islet of Urichar. The soil capital hadn't hardened enough for living but the folks made for the place in desperation.

This brings to the fore the question of adaptive changes which must first begin with the coastline. Our shoreline is jagged and the spaces within the continental shelf and some distances beyond are still witnessing new accretions. Mangrove afforestation and tall towering trees along the coastal belt together with thick vegetation on the new accretions will be useful preventive measures against cyclonic damages. In a flurry for inland tree plantation, let us not gloss over the persistent need for coastal afforestation. The probable impact of climatic changes on agriculture warrants forward planning to minimise it and go in for changes in the farming technology and cropping pattern. But unless we can bring down the net procreation rate we risk being doubly swamped — by sheer numbers and the rising sea.

After Rao, Who?

India is not synonymous with the Congress. Whether Rao or someone else leads the party in the parliamentary election in 1996, the Congress will be lucky if it is able to secure even the 190-odd seats, which it won in the last election.

tion and found him acquitting

When Shastri died all of a sudden at Tashkent in 1966. there was no anxiety or uneasiness. The Congress party took its own time to elect the leader because of its internal squabbles. Once again the democratic system came into play and gave India Mrs Gandhi as its prime minister. By then, the process had come to stay. It confirmed that in a democratic structure, the system mattered, not the person.

When Prime Minister Narasimha Rao said at a recent Congress rally in New Delhi. After Rao, Who?, he was seeking cheap publicity. The question of Nehru's days does not have the connotation now what it was then. Nearly half a dozen prime ministers have come and gone since, obeying the calls of the constitution. which was introduced in 1950. Rao's question chimes in with the people's anxiety in the early sixties, wanting to know, After Nehru, Who? But who will succeed Rao is now no more than a curiosity.

Rao does not enjoy the stature of Nehru, who was a colossus. Nor is he indispensable as Nehru was when India stepped into independence after the 150-year-old slavery. People were worried then because there was no way to know whether anyone could protect the edifice of parliamentary system he had structured. After all, it happened in a country next door to India.

That Rao skipped the names of Mrs Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi is understandable because both are merely a parenthesis to the history. But he did it for different reasons. He wanted to be compared himself with Nehru so as to have the vicarious satisfaction of being tall.

Rao has been lucky. He did not have to face the world. which was divided into two antagonist blocs, western and

eastern. After Nehru, a weak.

got mixed so well that they provide sinews to the democratic structure.

It is rare that a third world country, where literacy is limited and where nearly half the population is below the poverty line, gets attuned to choosing rulers freely and for a fixed period. India has done it and it is for everyone to see. Time and again the cassandras have wondered whether India can endure under democratic institutions. They have been

proved wrong. In fact, Rao should have

again and found viable. Still, Rao had the cheek to propose a debate on after Nehru, who?, as if the system will collapse the moment he quits.

Even his other observation at the rally, "it's just there that there should not be a vacuum in the party" was uncalled for. Let him recall the time when he was chosen the Congress party president after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. Arjun Singh had proposed the name of Sonia Gandhi and the Congress working committee had given it a thundering approval. It was she who said no. Rao was nowhere in the pic-

has been tested again and

After Sonia Gandhi's refusal, the party began looking for a suitable person. Both Arjun Singh and Sharad Pawar had greater pull in the Congress than Rao. But they were poles apart. Had they joined hands, one of them could have succeeded Rajiv. When both crossed each other out, Rao's name emerged, a person who was not given even the party ticket in the 1991 elections He came to be adopted as the consensus candidate. Still the arrangement was ad hoc till someone who could galvanise the party was found. But in the Congress, once a person comes to occupy the prime minister's gaddi, he or she manages to stay back. Such are the levers of authority.

Two years ago, when Rao

was still being needled by Arjun Singh on the one hand and Pawar on the other. asked Kerala chief minister K Karunakaran in Trivandrum if there was a possibility of a change at the Centre. He coolly answered that once you had installed a person it was impossible to get an agreement on someone else and hence "Rao will complete his term."

Firstly, there is no vacuum in the party and Rao's observation is meant only to underline his importance. Secondly, if there is. he has to blame himself. He has cut other leaders to size like Mrs Gandhi did to make sure her son Rajiv would succeed. Rao has followed suit because his eyes are fixed on the next term.

Indeed, Rao has emerged stronger. But this has been at the expense of the party. It is a strange spectacle that the Congress is losing ground — it is nowhere in UP or Bihar. which have 139 seats in the 546-member Lok Sabha - but Rao is getting more acceptability.

Even if there is a vacuum in the party, how does the question, After Rao, Who?, arise? India is not synonymous with the Congress. Whether Rao or someone else leads the party in the parliamentary election in 1996, the Congress will be lucky if it is able to secure even the 190-odd seats, which it won in the last election.

The question, After Rao, Who?, will be relevant after the next election in the sense that there is none in the Congress party who can manoeuvre and manipulate so well as he has done in the last three years. converting the party's minority into majority. All are not past masters in such things. From that point of view. Rao is indispensable for the Congress.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

backward India, adhering to his policy of non-alignment, looked vulnerable. Some of Rao's predecessors went through anxious moments. The end of cold war has seen the end of blocs. Rao can lean towards Washington and Moscow at the same time, without be-

ing asked on which side he is. The democratic system in India has also acquired the dynamics of its own. It has gained in strength through general elections held again and again over the last 44 years. On the other hand, high traditions of the armed forces and those of the country have recognised these assets instead of indulging in selfpraise. He should have known from experience how the system is functioning. For nearly two and a half years, he headed a minority government. All that he had to do was to survive the motion of vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha, as the parliamentary system demands. A few months ago, when he managed to save his government by 'wooing' and 'winning over' seven votes to prove a majority, the eyes of the nation were focussed on parliament, not the South Block, the mili-

tary headquarters. The system

POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Global Integration of Market Seen as a Probable Solution

HE sitting-room (outside) parleys and parliamentary (inside) debates agonisingly persists with no visible solutions to end mass poverty. A recent ODA statistics (The Daily Star 7 June '94) says Bangladesh has nine crore plus poor, which is 78 per cent of our population. India has 35 crore which is 40 per cent of the Indians and, Pakistan has 28 per cent poor which amounts to three and half crore Pakistanis.

N the last years of

Jawaharlal Nehru, who

was India's prime min-

ister for nearly two decades,

people in the country and

abroad were tormented by the

fear that his successor might

not keep India together or

orderly as he had done. The

question on their lips was:

After Nehru, who? An

American broadcaster, Wells

Hengen, after serving in Delhi

for three years, spelled out the

misgivings in a book. After

successors were Morarji Desai,

V K Krishna Menon, Lal

Bahadur Shastri, Y B Chavan.

Indira Gandhi, Jaya Prakash

Narain, S K Patil and Lt. Gen.

Bril Mohan Kaul. Three of

them, Shastri, Mrs Gandhi and

Desai, made the prime minis-

Who?, became the talk of the

country after he fell ill a few

months before his death in

1964. When he recovered

briefly, one intrepid journalist

asked him the question. Nehru

was a modest person. He said

his successor would be the

the population at that time. It

was a natural reply of a person

who believed in the

was that the democratic sys-

tem in India was strong

enough to throw up his suc-

cessor. He was proved right.

Lal Bahadur Shastri became

the prime minister, affirming

the Biblical saying that the

meek would inherit the earth.

The Congress parliamentary

party, which had a majority in

the Lok Sabha, elected him its

leader. The worried nation,

which wondered who would

step into Nehru's shoes, felt

relieved at the peaceful transi-

What Nehru tried to convey

sovereignty of people.

433 million people of India.

The poser, After Nehru,

tership in that order.

In his gallery of potential

Nehru, Who?

These statistics do not seem to pain the sub-continent's politicians, bureaucrats and economists. Seminars. sermons, five-year plans place poverty alleviation in the forefront without achieving anything in reality. It is not too difficult to assume that poverty will never be eliminated by the policy-making geniuses. Government economic policies had rather ruined Bangladesh's first administration. The technically competent socialist economists had convinced Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for a drastic change towards greater state control

and ownership. We fail to realise that all great political victories or debacles are economic in nature. The modern West had won the forty-year cold war because their market-based economic policies achieved prosperity and economic freedom for the common man which the Socialist world could not match.

Napoleon was defeated on the economic front (continental system). Apart from military reasons (Moscow campaign, Trafalgar and Waterloo). Nepoleon who was carrying the French Revolution to the downtrodden Europeans (Italians, Swiss, Dutch and Germans). had to face hostility of the same people whose goodwill had enabled him to triumph at the

beginning. To beat England which he could not by war, the Emperor had introduced the Continental system as an economic weapon forbidding France and her allies to accept British goods. Trade stagnated consumer goods turned enormously expensive or unobtainable as ships were laid up and firms closed down (Denis Richard, Modern Europe). "Everywhere the tide of sentiment turned against Napoleon as the middle and lower classes felt the effect of his rule in high prices and strict custom rules and declining trade"

Restrictions on individual enterprise and 'government do it all' type of economic planning depopularised the then Awami League government. Loss of popularity, paradoxically led to greater economic and political control as Bangabandhu was made to believe that, awful conspiracies were undermining his government.

Mikhail Gorbachev lost his presidency and the USSR because he was a 'poor economist' unable to respond swiftly to the economic reality of the market. Boris Yeltsin is doing no better. He too, has inadequate knowledge of the market and a nonintervening government. UK's Labour Party is yet to win because of their poor economies. Clinton survives because NAFTA does.

This sub-continent is yet to improve the ODA or UNDP statistics because the politicians seem to have poor knowledge or belief in market power. Narasimha Rao almost seems pushed and dragged by the World Bank. Much of their liberalisation programme is done in secrecy instead of engaging in public debates to win their points. Rao is only too lucky to have the services of a capable finance minister.

Mr Saifur Rahman is possibly the lone pro-market cabinet member. His non-political, non-MP status makes it more difficult to convince a cabinet skeptical of economic or political liberalisation. Benazir Bhutto, Begum Khaleda Zia all promise government intervention to improve the lot of the commonmen instead of promising to devolve power to the common individual to better his life. Macro-economic government successes are not sufficient to steer economies out of poverty Grameen Bank alone cannot alleviate poverty more because Grameen loans do not help the lower class to join the middle strata of the society.

For prosperity, we need to exercise individual liberty. technically labelled micro-economic reforms. Only such reform and unobstructive economic freedom can alleviate poverty. The Bangladeshi border entrepreneur must be able to carry truck loads of legally imported Indian merchandise to Dhaka without the fear of harassment and confiscation With or without border police force, such Indian goods are already in the market place. Obstacles keep the well-intended small investors economically idle.

Our humble jute growers must be able to sell their crop to the highest bidder — be it the Indian Marwari across the border, the corporate giants of our country or the government owned BJMC mills or, they should enjoy the liberty to sell directly to the Western buyers who usually buy through government approved/licensed exporters). The growers must have the freedom to enter into contracts and agreements with buyers of their own choice. It

by Nizam Ahmad will not take more than few seasons for the growers to become solvent if allowed the economic freedom to exploit their market. This may even succeed to add value to the crop such as, a baling press to cut transport costs. a warehouse to store so as to sell when the price is right etc. The grower's next generation, believably an educated and confident one, could even think of establishing jute mills - the horizontal expansion of his trade. And again, the market ultimately decides where the jute mills will be located - in Caloutta, Narsingdi, or Narayanganj. Varied market factors such as, cheaper access to raw materials, easier access to sea ports, lower mill operation costs etc., will be the deciding factors for the locations of such jute mills and not the Planning bureaus of national governments.

Our recent bumper rice production having immense potential for international marketing is once again subjected to old laws of government intervention. The government will issue licenses to a selected few to do the monopoly in export trade. The government will also decide which category of rice is for the export. It is clear that, farmers will again be offered 'take it or leave it' prices at the farmgate level. These government steps are disincentives to the commercialisation of our rice production.

Again the policy of protectionism, high taxes to maintain a large bureaucracy, excessive government trade regulations unrealistic foreign exchange controls etc., are the reasons behind the expansion of underground markets. Like in Hong Kong, trade should be made free of obstacles. Tiny Hong Kong exports US \$100 billion every year. It is the freedom of individual entrepreneurs and firms that makes this possible. Free trade promotes good neighbourly relations since all relations (macro or micro) are economic-based. China will never think of invading Taiwan. Singapore or Hong Kong despite ideological compulsions because of the economic reasons

benefitting China. We, the Bangladeshis have more foreign currency stocked and hoarded under our pillows than what the local banks declare to have. Countless more is deposited in foreign accounts. This is the result of an unrealistic foreign currency law just as unlimited business potential of our people lie underutilised because our economy has too much government meddling. Our tadbir culture in which the entrepreneur must know someone influential to progress in business has failed miserably to alleviate poverty.

In a free market, the government exercises absolute power to punish the wrong-doers hurting consumer and producer interests. The reverse happens with government per sonnel collaborating and profiting from the underground market in dictated economies. Fake products, spurious drugs and death are all too common in our economy. People go unpunished because profits will diminish.

"Third World economic planning mechanism", writes UCLA Economics Professor Deepak Lal, "is an attitude born of a distrust of, if not contempt for, the ordinary, poor, uneducated masses. This attitude is not confined entirely, nor even primarily, to Western outsiders, it is shared by many in the ruling elites of the Third World. It is easy to suppose that these half-starved, wretched and ignorant masses could not possibly confirm, either as producers or consumers to the behavioral assumption of orthodox neoclassical economies that people would act economically, when the opportunity of an advantage was presented to them. Denying this, is the hallmark of much of 'development' economies together with the assertion that some ethereal and verbally sanitised entity (such as government, planners or policy makers), which is both knowledgeable and compassionate. can overcome the defects of these ignorant producers and consumers and compel them to raise their living standard through various government controls and planning" (The Poverty of Development Economies, IEA).

Likewise, our planners, the bureaucracy and the chamberelites refuse to believe that uneducated peasants act economically as producers and consumers. However, peasants do respond intelligently to changes in relative prices much as neo-classical theory predicts. To force us out of our present economic oblivion, we do not need government interventions but the political decision and consensus to grant us individual economic freedom, the freedom of economic mobility, trade, liberal financial transactions and payment order, low taxes, least import and easing of border restrictions, a small but efficient government, independent courts and press to hunt the wicked and the corrupt. Nation states theory can no longer build economies in isolation. Global integration of the market is the solution to human peace and prosperity

The writer is Executive Chairman, MOER. The views are his own, and not of the organi-

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.

A flicker of hope

Sir, In Bangladesh we are unfortunate to be beset with hoards of seemingly unsurmountable problems most of which are man-made and not at all impossible to remove with sincere efforts by those who feel that we should leave behind a heritage that our children and grand children will remember with pride and at the same time create a healthy atmosphere all around

Inspite of everything sometimes one sees a flicker of light and alas they are at most of the times short-lived. But when we see these, we feel so happy and pray that the flicker turns into light and brightens up.

The other day, a pleasant surprise was awaiting me when I went to Dhaka Railway Station at noon to receive some one who was expected to arrive from Chittagong by the Mahanagar Provati. The train was late by 90 minutes. Normally, the delay would have

annoyed a great deal and I

would have come home and go back to the station again. But the day was very hot and humid. So, I decided to stay at the station and have a look around. Anybody would think me to be crazy because the Dhaka Railway Station, they say, was not a clean and pleasant place to wonder around. But I must say that my decision to stay back at the station has been rewarding.

I loitered around on the upper and lower class passenger concourse, peeped into the second class female waiting room, walked on the platforms and the inner concourse, went to the upper class refreshment room for a cup of coffee, looked into the toilets and I found all very clean indeed. The stalls were well-kept and clean. I noticed that the baby-taxis were parked systematically at a special parking place. The rickshaws were parked at the parking

were parked at a separate parking place. On the whole, the station

and the immediate surroundings gave a very clean and orderly look. It was amazing, how was it like that and why? Were the Railway people awaiting any inspection by any higher-up or a visit from the Prime Minister or any other special reason? Or was it a part of an effort to change the usual dismal situation?

I hope that the latter is the case. In that case, those who have made the changes possible deserve to be congratulated and one would hope continuous efforts will made to maintain the improvement so achieved

In this context, I must mention about the overall improvement brought about in the Chittagong roads and about the general cleanliness. Thanks and congratulations are due to all those in the port city and the Dhaka Railway station whose efforts made this wonder happen. It is not the achievement of one man, but entire teams have made this possible. May the achievements of these dedicated people last and not face away into nothingness.

We the citizens of this unfortunate country have become habitual pessimists but there are things which do at times give us a spark of hope. Let us place for rickshaws in a little all project such things so that we do not lose hope altodisorderly manner. Other cars gether?

P G Muhammad

SAARC news media exchange

Sir, The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), consisting of seven South Asian countries, was designed for cooperation amongst seven member countries, to solve through dialogue across the table any area, in the field of politics, finance, economy, trade, commerce cultural activities, exchange of news etc. This process was meant to come closer to each other in a spirit of harmony and amity, and then take optimal steps to materialise the issues and agreements thus arrived at. The other aim was to identify the areas where they

could come closer. The exchange of information and news media is on such area and it is a sine qua non for enabling the people of the member countries to get to know each other and have the much needed information. Doubtless, we watch documentaries over the mini screen under SAVE (SAARC Audio Visual Exchange) on certain occasions, but this is not sufficient enough. To have a first hand knowledge and information, there should be free exchange and flow of print media in English, which is the official language of SAARC, under the auspices of SAARC, to be named as SNME (SAARC News Print Media) on the pattern of

SAVE.

When we can have the magazines like Newsweek, Time etc. we in Bangladesh should also have the right circulate our noted English dailies, weeklies amongst member states, who in their turn, should circulate their English dailies, weeklies etc. for circulation in Bangladesh.

N H Suft Mohammadpur

A clarification Sir. I refer to the report, by

your staff correspondent, published in your esteemed daily on July 14, 1994, on a seminar held in Dhaka on July 13, 1994. The subject of discussion was "China's open policy and its complimentary role in developing international understanding". A section of the above report carries reference to the speech I made on the occasion. But, very unfortunately for me, my speech was entirely misconstrued to mean that I was just pleading for more help for Bangladesh from China. Though I am all for bigger and ever expanding cooperation between Bangladesh and China in all fields, and this point, however, was not raised in my speech at all. The point I stressed was that there has to be a new international economic order for developing a lasting international understanding and China being a big

and developing country and a major world power as well as in a position to contribute still more in the struggle to replace the unjust and unfair international economic order by a new, just and fair international economic order and thereby can help create the material basis for stable international understanding through all round economic cooperation between nations of the world. This is what all genuine friends of China in the Third World — to which China itself belongs - expect of China and this expectation is fully justi-

Nurul Huda Mirza Uttara Model Town, Dhaka

Jamuna levy surcharge

Sir. The government adopted a by-law to stop the collection of Jamuna Levy Surcharge long time ago. But, I had to give Jamuna levy surcharge at the rate of Tk 10.00 per annum for renewal of my driving licence at the General Post Office for the period June 1994 to June 1997 and on telephone bills of May 1994, at the rate of five per

But why? To fill whose pockets? Would the authorities look into the absurd motives?

Purana Paltan, Dhaka