

No More Political Chaos Please!

With Sheikh Hasina's call for unseating the BNP government, the ruling party and the main opposition party seem to have reached almost a point of no return. They had their differences from the beginning but at least the two parties agreed to work together for establishing democracy in the country. After some stormy sessions both inside and outside of parliament, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Awami League did part their ways when the latter together with other small opposition parties decided not to attend the parliamentary sessions, especially after the Magura election fiasco.

This time the rift apparently is complete. The opposition chief's one-point demand cannot be taken lightly simply because of the implicit threat in it. With the government taking no serious initiatives to break the stalemate — apart from issuing some routine platitudinous remarks — the opposition is hardening its stance. In fact, the government indifference to the opposition demands is a good enough provocation for the disenchanted parties to go in action against the ruling party.

So the country's political scene is becoming chaotic once again. Instead of settling the scores in parliament, streets have been chosen as the venue for the purpose. Already the sign is ominous. Quite a number of hartals have been observed in the meantime. More are to follow soon with more militancy and aggression added to them. If the clashes and killings in Chittagong are any indication, the nation has to be prepared for still worse violence and more deaths. Evidently we are sliding into the political quagmire we once had come through. So coming back to square one after so much sacrifice makes us really scary of the country's future.

The important question is where do we go from here? Both the ruling party and the opposition have failed the nation. Their political squabbling has virtually proved an unpleasant point. The point is that as a nation we are yet to be fit for democracy. But this is none of the people's fault. For once the maxim that people get the government they deserve looks not quite tenable. It is the people who have reasons to feel betrayed.

The process of political deconstruction is what has been set in. Its fall-outs are coming to the fore with increasing force of negativism. The colossal losses incurred by the nation due to work stoppages, hartals and sieges should have indicated where our political priorities lie. The political parties, especially the ruling party, have failed to read that message properly. That the foreign investors are so reluctant to invest here is seldom taken note of. The politics of confrontation is what is to blame for the failure to reach a consensus on some key issues. Governments come and governments go but the country remains and so do those issues.

In a situation pregnant with ill bodings and all kinds of apprehension, time is fast running out for initiating moves to avert a socio-political catastrophe. As the party in power, the BNP cannot shirk its added responsibility to open a dialogue. The opposition is in a state of desperation — one that has originated more out of its frustration than from any principled stand in favour of the people. Taking advantage of their bickering, the fundamentalist forces led by the Jamaat-e-Islami have in the meantime been gaining political grounds. Both the ruling party and the opposition must come out clean on this issue and jointly halt the advances of the anti-liberation and communal forces.

To that end let the ruling party initiate moves to bring the opposition to the next session of parliament and work out a formula to do business in the House.

Finally a Clear Statement on NGOs

Better late than never. Director General of the NGO Affairs Bureau, that functions directly under the Prime Minister's secretariat, categorically refuted the claim that some NGOs were involved in any anti-religious activities. "We have no knowledge of any NGOs involved in any anti-religious activities anywhere in the country," M.A. Mannan, DG of NGO Bureau said on Thursday. "Let them come up with specific instances," he challenged.

We welcome this clear statement by the government on a topic that has been agitating the public mind for sometime now. It would have been far better if such a clear and categorical announcement from the authorities would have come earlier. It would have saved a lot of confusion, and would not have permitted interest groups to take advantage of the silence of the government, and carry on their motivated propaganda.

However welcome, this statement by the government is not enough. The authorities should now ask the various groups who are spreading such lies, to desist from such actions on the pain of being charged with creating public disorder and confusion and taken to court. Because it was the false propaganda of these groups that led to the destruction of property including schools and trees. This must be made to stop immediately. The mass media that helped to spread these lies, without doing investigation on their own, should also be asked to desist forthwith from such lies. Regardless of one's own views about NGOs, a newspaper must, at all cost, live up to its most fundamental professional obligation — that of being authentic in supplying information to the public. One may have reasons for disliking the work of an NGO. And he or she has the right to express that view. But we do not have any right to spread false information against anybody, group or organisation, just to suit our own convenience.

Much too much damage has already been caused to a community — the NGOs — most of whom have done extremely laudable work. Their reputation, and more importantly, their public image, have been affected. The NGOs have a right to have their good reputation restored. And those who have damaged it, have a moral obligation to help in that task.

We would, at the same time, ask the NGO community, to be extremely cautious in carrying out their work, and to be sensitive to the religious values of our people, so that the interested quarters do not get any chance to malign them in the future. We do hope that no more lies will be spread about NGOs' work. If there is evidence, let's have them.

International Trade Pessimism: The Old and the New

by Abdul Bayes

INTERNATIONAL trade has long been under fire for being inimical to the growth and development of less developed economies (LDCs). The 'unequal exchange' is alleged to have contributed to the perpetuation of poverty and under development of LDCs. The critics of trade, including those from the 'lefts' as well as from the 'rights', tend to view trade as an engine of growth of the North only at the cost of the South. Needless to mention, such pessimism grew out of the differential production and trade structures of the North and the South — a production and trade structure always conducive to the interests of the North. The new pessimism, however, derives heavily from the dynamics of adjustment processes of the DCs in the context of the changed international economic perspectives, especially of the liberal trade regime, that gained currency in recent years. The pessimism is based on the neo-protectionism, on increasing tendencies towards regionalization and bloc formation and the danger of growing macro-economic instability. The differences between the optimists and the pessimists hinge on the degree of faith on the efficacy of the liberal world trade system. While a number of economists addressed this new dimension, in trade thoughts, mention could possibly be made of Heinz Gert Pressee of the Ibero-America Institute for Economic Research, University of Gottingen, Germany, who dealt with this issue in greater

length (Economics, Vol. 46 1992).

Past Pessimism

The old and conventional trade pessimism that shook the world during the 1950s owes its origin to the much celebrated work of famous economist, R Nurkse who saw the North-South problem as essentially a 'terms of trade' problem. The problem arose largely due to the dominance of agricultural and mineral raw materials in the production and trade baskets of the LDCs. Nurkse held the view that since the relative importance of raw materials as inputs for the industrial production had been constantly on a wane, the resultant distribution of earnings between the rich (North) and the poor (South) would swing more and more to the benefits of the former and thus be a drag on the latter's developmental efforts. By and large, the deprivation of the LDCs mainly originate from the fact that these countries mostly export goods of low income elasticity, import high income elastic goods and suffer from serious technological backwardness and under-development of the factors of production.

The subsequent development of events, however, seemed to challenge the above contention. The 'Secular Deterioration of Terms of Trade Hypothesis' could neither be hooked on to a sound theoretical underpinning nor could it unequivocally be placed on an empirical carpet. What Nurkse and his fellow trade pessimists failed to over-

look is, perhaps, the fact that production and trade basket is not static and as could be evidenced during the 1950s and 60s, a number of LDCs appeared to emerge as vanguards of independent industrialization. The more successful of them systematically used the international division of labor by concentrating on their comparative advantage in labor intensive, easily mastered industrial production processes and could penetrate the world market and get a strong foothold. A considerable change in the foreign trade structures of both DCs and LDCs soon crept into reject the earlier hypothesis put forth by the pessimists. If we evaluate the trade structures of least and less developed countries including those of the South Asia, substantial structural changes in the composition of exports and imports are also discernible. And since a larger share of exports of these countries comprise manufactured industrial goods, the terms of trade does not appear as unfriendly as it used to be in the late 1970s.

The New Pessimism

Modern trade pessimists like to argue that the expansion process now under way in many of LDCs should soon face constraints 'with a limited capacity of the old industrialized nations to absorb imports, so that any further inroads into the world markets by the developing countries must necessarily lead to grave disruption

of the world trade system. The rekindling of protectionism in the industrialized countries over recent years is as they claim, a clear indication of this development.'

The proponent of this thesis is WR Cline who built his arguments on the thoughts of Arthur Lewis. Cline goes on to argue that the fundamental problem lies in the differential rates of growth of industrial exports of LDCs and the import capacity of the DCs with the former outpacing the latter. And this asymmetrical relationship is determined by differing rates of growth of the domestic products in the two groups of countries and — above all — by the number of participants in the world market. Over half of the total developing countries' exports have been contributed by a relatively small group of countries (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan). The exports from these countries already set a limit of acceptance of increasing international competition for the industrialized countries. 'If the majority of developing countries were suddenly to adopt the same strategies as these four NICs, the absorption capacity of the industrialized countries would definitely be over taxed. It would therefore be a fallacy to recommend that the export-oriented development strategy be copied by all developing countries.'

A number of critics already rejected Cline's postulates but still many hold the view that a rejection of Cline's notion does

not nullify the fears of trade pessimism unfounded even under more realistic conditions. The burning question is not whether many countries could turn into NICs over night but whether rapid integration of the developing countries at large that posed for imminent industrialization would stress the absorption capacity of the developed countries. As we all know, it is inevitable that a number of industries of the industrialized countries would succumb to the price competition from those of the LDCs and if the process has to generate least unemployment cost then the released resources should get employment in some other lines of production as soon as possible.

The vital concern to the new trade pessimists is that such adjustment is taking place at a slower speed in the industrialized countries... so that adjustment bottlenecks have developed, hampering economic growth and hindering the exports of the developing countries... This is because structural change has intensified while adjustment flexibility has declined over the years... As countries grow to maturity, the impediments to adjust and hence their inability to adjust increase... Such tendencies have taken place at a time when the pressure to adjust has almost certainly increased.

Different authors therefore tend to depict that it is not groundless to fear that the mature industrialized countries are currently able to cope with the challenges of the world economy only to a limited ex-

tent due to their lower adjustment capacity. As a result, neo-protectionism and regional blocs are getting support and preeminence from politicians of the DCs. On the other hand, ring of optimism is displayed by the assurance that such a state of thing might be shortlived and hence it would be wrong to conclude that such development must necessarily continue into the future.

To be Pessimist or Not to Be?

It seems that while the old pessimists drastically underestimated the evolutionary dynamics of the developing countries, so opine some economists, modern pessimists too underestimate the learning capacity of those concerned at least for two reasons: First, after the recent developments in the international trade arena, a return to the isolation might generate higher social loss and second, the further developments of the free international division of labour promises to continue increasing the wealth of all participants. The pessimistic idea of modern trade pessimists could be faced by the optimistic argument that the free trend in world trade should heighten the welfare gains to such an extent as to lessen the adverse impacts of the interim interventions, if any.

The writer is a Professor of Economics, Jahangirnagar University.

Second Showdown on Separation Shaping up

Clyde Sanger writes from Ottawa

Once again Canada is preoccupied with talk of Quebec separation. In 1980, voters in the province rejected independence in a referendum, but this time around the separatists have wider support and more economic ammunition to back their cause.

Quebec then and now



campaign against Quebec separatism before the end of the year. Quebec is facing an election in September or October, and the PQ are strong favourites to defeat the provincial Liberals who have worn out

their popularity after nine years in power.

Parizeau has said he will take an election victory as a mandate to prepare Quebec to become a sovereign state, and will negotiate transfer of powers with the federal government in Ottawa. Then, within eight to 10 months, he will hold a referendum to win a forthright vote on sovereignty.

The reaction of many Canadians is, "Oh, yeah. We have been down this road before." That is partly true. The PQ won power in 1976 and held a referendum nearly four years later to win a mandate to negotiate what it called "sovereignty-association," which apparently would have involved keeping strong economic links with the rest of Canada.

The PQ lost the 1980 referendum by a margin of 40 to 60. Opinion polls are suggesting the PQ would lose again, if by a narrower margin. Tacticians have said Parizeau has blundered by pledging to hold a vote so soon after an election. He should wait to prove that his government is efficient and that Ottawa is blocking every demand he makes, they say.

There are many differences, however, between now and 1980. In 1980, Pierre Trudeau was a potent force in Quebec, and promised its 6.5 million people a new future, which has not dawned.

The federal Members of Parliament from Quebec were then nearly all Liberals — and federalists — and they had a strong network throughout the province. Last October, on the

other hand, the Bloc Quebecois (BQ) swept 54 federal seats under a highly intelligent leader, Lucien Bouchard. The BQ is also pledged to seek sovereignty, in alliance with Parizeau, and will use its platform in Ottawa and its organization in Quebec to that end.

The wild card this time is an economic one. In 1980, many voters rejected sovereignty because they believed Quebec would be worse off on its own. The same may happen again, especially at a time when about 800,000 Quebecers are able to work are living on unemployment insurance or welfare. Bouchard has tackled this issue head on, saying that Ottawa has sent the economy into a tailspin, that there is wasteful duplication in a federal system and that Quebec on its own is bound to do better.

Parizeau himself has good credentials as an economist — he studied at Harvard and the London School of Economics — and was a successful finance minister a dozen years ago. Of equal significance, he has managed to recruit some impressive businessmen as PQ candidates.

Parizeau plans to fight the election on the issue of 'good government,' meaning a sound financial base and looking to the United States for investment. The Quebec Liberal Premier, Daniel Johnson, seems determined to plug the point that a vote for the PQ is a vote for the uncertainty of independence.

And Jean Chretien? He is stonewalling and offering

Quebec nothing special. Nothing, at any rate, before a referendum. "I don't have a

Commission for Racial Equality Steps up Anti-racism Campaign

Kofi Akumanyi writes from London

BRITAIN'S Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) is engaging more organisations, institutions and individuals to pledge their commitment through action to tackle racial discrimination and prejudice.

Speaking at the launch of the Commission's 1993 Annual Report on 29 June in London, CRE chairman Herman Ouseley said the organisation believed that racism could only be tackled if every person and organisation made a positive and active contribution to end racial prejudice.

Pointing out the CRE's new structure and better focus on priorities, he said: "A climate is developing which recognises a willingness for people to work with the CRE and through other institutions to achieve equality outcomes."

An example of the organisation's renewed focus is a new home office-backed television advertisement campaign "Don't let racism grow", which was shown for the first time on the 29 June, aimed at improving race relations. The three-year campaign, which will also make use of posters, features six babies of different races with the words "Don't Let Racism Grow".

Then annual report showed that the CRE handled 1,630 complaints of racial discrimination last year — an increase

of 73 over 1992 with more than two-thirds concerning racism at work. About 210 cases were settled out of court or ended successfully after a tribunal hearing. Only 26 were dismissed.

Mr Ouseley said the total amount of compensation awarded rose from 79,117 pounds sterling to 311, 579 pounds, but the bulk of that involved a 229,000 pounds payment to 82 Asians against a company, John Haggas of Leeds, Northern England, which tried to introduce an all-Asian night shift.

The CRE is a statutory institution established by the 1976 Race Relations Act charged with three fundamental duties: To work towards the elimination of racial discrimination, to promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different racial groups generally, and keep under review the workings of the act, and when it thinks necessary, to draw up and submit to the government proposals for amending it.

Its most important powers are formal investigation into any area of national life and the issuing of codes of practice for the elimination of discrimination, as well as the promotion of equality in the field of employment.

The writer is an LPS staff

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.

Caretaker Govt

Sir, While the opposition parties are all for a caretaker government during the next general election, the ruling party is dead against it. This has led to a deadlock and muddling in the political arena.

One of the reasons, it seems, why the BNP Govt is allergic to the idea of caretaker government is that as soon as they concede the demand, the opposition parties are likely to come out with the demand for immediate election which the BNP does not like. Of course the general public also do not want any immediate election.

When the general election takes place, and if the BNP wins as a ruling party, all the opposition parties will claim that elections have been rigged. So BNP in its own interest should hold the general election under a caretaker government. Not only the next general election but all elections for the next twenty years should be held under a caretaker government because our masses have lost their confidence in political government to hold free and fair general elections.

However, the next general election under a caretaker government will not be held now but in due time when the present government completes its full tenure of five years. The opposition parties should come out with an open declaration that if the demand for caretaker government is accepted by the BNP they won't press for an immediate election. Only this way a solution to the present impasse can be found out.

Mrs Momtaz Jahan Fulbari, Sylhet

Growth of puppetry

Sir, The item on puppets in your Weekend Magazine of July 15, 1994, "Bringing the World of Make-believe to Life" by Raffat Binte Rashid, alongside the inset, "Puppets Around the World" was refreshing in the sense that puppetry does not

normally make for 'good copy' in this part of the world. Having been an active puppeteer for almost forty years, I would like to place on record my appreciation for the multi-talented Mustafa Manwar for starting a 'Multi Media Puppet Development Centre' which was lacking until now.

It was a long cherished wish of mine to set up a full fledged puppet theatre which never materialised for health reasons. So I am pleased to find someone worthy who could finally do it, or something akin to it. Puppetry has come a long way since it was first introduced to the BTV viewers in the sixties and, if nothing else, it is now a universally accepted medium but, I do feel that better use can be made of them especially for projecting social messages.

As for its history, puppets have been in use since 500 BC which makes them almost 2500 years old, and most cultures use them to tell stories and myths. Puppets, however, did not reach England until the 17th century when Punch and Judy arrived from Italy, as heirs of the Italian "Punchinello," and is still, today, "Ye Olde English" stand-by as entertainment. After this, they quickly branched out across the globe ultimately resulting in what are probably the best known puppets of them all, Jim Henson's "Muppets" which

continue to be a fitting memorial to him. But, if Bangladeshi puppets are to come anywhere near this standard, BTV must be ready to invest more into them, especially in the form of hard cash.

Sylvia Mortzoza Dhaka

Electricity bills

Sir, Now-a-days, electricity is used in almost all the households of the country. The electricity bill comes to its users at the end of each month. There are much irregularities in preparation of these bills. The metre-reading is not followed in a proper way. What is the justification to have the metre in every house if the metre-readings are not meticulously followed?

It is observed that the bill often amounts to an exaggerated sum than the metre actually reads. The money spent becomes more than the amount of electricity consumed.

The cause behind it, is the negligence of the metre-readers. It is doubt whether they come to read the metre once in six months. It is often alleged that without reading and knowing the actual situation they make the electricity bills. The reverse of that always occurs too. The bills of those who

use electric heaters as stoves have causes to be more than what others are usually paying. But they often have to pay the bills less than others. It is only possible if the metre readers work in collaboration with some dishonest staff of Power Development Board in this unlawful scheme. And often it is heard that those who do not maintain a good relation with them are seriously harassed by the offenders.

In this connection, we should like to draw the kind attention to the authorities concerned.

Mahmuda Khatun Shathi Jubily Bagan Lane Sirajgonj

Rush relief to Rwanda

Sir, Giant fragments of rocket did not hit the earth, it fell on Jupiter and we are all saved. But possibly the greatest catastrophe of human history of the 20th century has occurred in the Central African State of Rwanda wherein following the death of President Habyarimana in a plane crash in April 1994, the country has plunged into a civil war; thousands have been killed by bullets and millions of people are now struggling to stave off starvation and disease. It is re-

ported that on an average over one thousand Rwandans are dying daily.

It is a colossal human tragedy inexplicable in words. Whatever we are, wherever we are, we are all morally bound to rush food, medicine and relief materials to save our fellow humans on the verge of death in Rwanda. The US President Bill Clinton has already ordered round-the-clock airlift of supplies and medicines to confront hunger and disease.

We would request our government and our people to rush relief materials, whatever they can afford to Rwanda without further delay.

O H Kabir Dhaka

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Sir, Bangladesh can fly a Biman plane to Rwanda loaded with Oral Saline (and other local medicines), accompanied by a team of doctors and nurses (ref Star editorial, July 24).

A Zahir Dhaka