

Transit Facility is Not the Only Way Out

Like most of the Indian delegations previously visiting Bangladesh the business team which came here lately from our big neighbour has stressed the need for transit facilities for reducing the huge trade gap between the two countries.

Before going for the transit option there are several other snags to be removed and some simpler routes tried out. Opening transit facility is more a political than a trade decision.

Bilateral trade with the provision for more goods from Bangladesh entering Indian market may be part of the reversal process. Products from Bangladesh have to face an unreasonably high tariff value at the time of entering the Indian market.

This certainly is not asking for any preferential treatment but only reciprocity. If the tariff value is same at both ends no stands to lose.

More pertinently, if the two sides are serious enough, they ought to explore areas where the trade-gap can be addressed even more effectively. Collaborative ventures in Bangladesh with Indian investment can succeed through a buy-back arrangement.

Much as the transit route may be beneficial for both, it will be too early to allow India to use such facilities now. Given the political implications and sensitivity associated with the issue, the preparation of a ground work is very much necessary.

An Inspiring Tale

A common Bangla adage that stands in lame English translation as "fire shall burn through ash" could not find a better illustration than it has done in the life of Amir Hossain of Nagarpar Village in Comilla.

Had he accepted the fate of a servant all through his life — as most boys and girls in his position do — Amir would never have made news. He has in him the fire that makes one transcend beyond his boundary.

Amir has however made one giant stride only, he still has a long way to go. The indication so far is good. He is studying in class six. His employer has guided him quite well and will hopefully do so in future.

Amir is fortunate to have an employer-patron in Monoranjan Chakma. Not all of them are so lucky. But it is exactly at this point we appeal to wealthy people to be a little more caring and give a chance for the hapless boys and girls who shed their sweat for the comfort of their employers.

I just could not believe my eyes when I read the headline in a Bengali language daily on 30 July. Reporting on the public meeting organised by the United Action Council of the Islamic parties held in Manik Mia Avenue on 29 July, it said that a speaker stated that some people, who received western education, broke up Pakistan treacherously.

Has Anybody the Right to Cast Aspersions on the Patriotism of our Freedom Fighters?

country have already given a long rope to the collaborators and their patrons but this is the limit. We must draw the line at some point.

The public utterances of the venerable religious leaders at the meeting was also a threat to the traditional friendship that we happen to enjoy with the Western countries. These nations have stood by us in our times of need.

In an earlier article I wrote about the attack launched by

Jamaat and other Islamic extremists against the NGOs. Now they seem to have broadened their target. Modern education itself is their target. It is reminiscent of the bitter campaign launched by the Mullahs and assorted Muslim extremists against Sir Syed Ahmad, the founder of the famous Aligarh University and a pioneer of modern education among the Muslims of north-western India.

They don't like rural students to attend modern schools in increasing numbers because such a trend spells disaster for their makhtabs and madrashas; they don't like women to acquire new skills and secure gainful employment because this takes them out of the grip of their power.

of Bangladesh. The political environment of the sub-continent was vitiated by communal and religious distrust and hatred since the forties. In the upheavals which accompanied the partition of India in 1947 several million people perished. They were the victims of the venom of religious hatred.

ON THE RECORD by Shah AMS Kibria

half the venerable Maulanas are re-enacting the same drama in Bangladesh. The reasons advanced against modern education are the same as those that Sir Syed Ahmad faced. It is a pathetic attempt to erect a wall against the winds of change, progress and modernisation.

Despite the Dissent, TV Sticks with the Benevolent Soldiers

Salil Sarkar writes from Paris

French denial of a hidden agenda in its military intervention in Rwanda is a recognition of criticisms of the operation not only from developing countries but from within France itself.

RENCH television has been happy with its footage of clean-shaven, crew-cut, muscle-bound French soldiers benevolently doling out food to famished, frightened and sometimes crippled Africans.

That safely non-political, view of Paris' armed intervention in Rwanda is welcomed by Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF — Doctors Without Frontiers), a group of French doctors and nurses which has become famous for its rapid-response let's-do-the-job-and-worry-about-politics-later forays into the world's war zones.

For two months before the intervention, its leaders had been lobbying a hesitant French government to despatch troops.

"France alone proposed an answer," maintains MSF chairman Philippe Biberson.

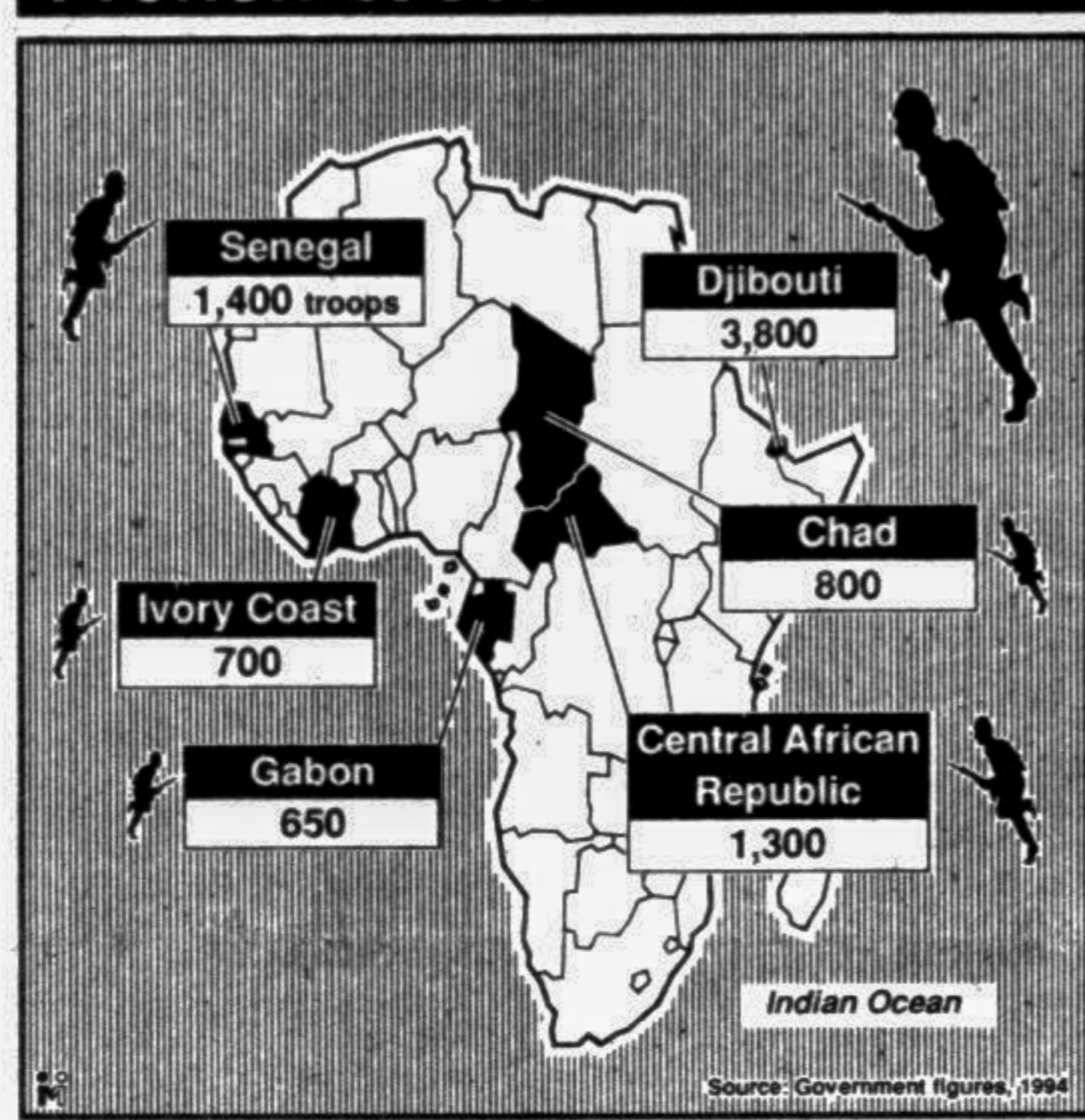
Not true. A group of 14 African countries, including Zimbabwe and Ghana, had agreed to send in forces. But the West ignored African requests for weapons to enable them to do the job properly.

Nevertheless, the response to Paris' initially humanitarian and subsequently military move has been by no means unanimous here. In contrast to most TV coverage, much of the print media has been critical of Operation Turquoise.

So have a number of prominent politicians.

"It's pure and simple colonialism," said former Gaullist prime minister and Foreign Legion officer Pierre Messmer.

French bases in Africa



"What a mistake. It's up to the Africans to intervene themselves."

The Communist party vehemently protested against the shift from humanitarian to military intervention and even diehard conservative MPs

scowled at the government's actions. Centrist Valery Giscard d'Estaing, a former president, is particularly uncomfortable about the idea of shooting it out with the advancing rebels.

Why did France more in troops under its own command rather than that of the United Nations? Because, said France's UN Ambassador, "such a force would no longer be considered neutral" — the implication being that French forces under French command in Rwanda would be deemed neutral, despite being led by a former military adviser to the assassinated Hutu President, Juvenal Habyarimana.

Then there were the questions raised by the New York-based Human Rights Watch which reminded the world of the millions of dollars worth of weapons supplied to Habyarimana's army by Paris. And possibly the most damaging: Colette Le Sord reported that French soldiers were responsible for shooting down the plane carrying Habyarimana and Cyprien Ntaryamira, President of neighbouring Burundi, the double assassination which sparked

the massacres. Such charges have not really been countered in Paris, just as the only reaction to a human Rights Watch request to Paris to investigate Hutu killers know to be hiding in the French safe haven on Rwanda's western border was intense irritation and sealed lips.

The reason appears to be that there are rifts within the Foreign Ministry, military and secret services over the Rwanda operation. The weekly Le Point claims that Socialist President Francois Mitterrand and his Gaullist Foreign and Interior Ministers, Alain Juppe and Charles Pasqua are entirely in favour of armed meddling in Africa.

Hostile to France's "African power" role are Prime Minister Edouard Balladur and Cooperation Minister and former top intelligence officer Michel Roussin, both Gaullists, as well as centrist defence Minister Francois Léotard.

Dissenting civil servants and senior intelligence officials have been nudged to the sidelines of policy-making and told to shut up. But harsh criticism keeps cropping up from unidentified official sources in reputable French newspapers.

All are aware that France became Rwanda's first friend shortly after its independence

from Belgium's in 1962. A decade later the head of Rwanda's presidential guard, Habyarimana, surrounded by Hutu extremists, seized power with France's blessing.

A guerrilla operation against Habyarimana by the predominantly Tutsi Patriotic Front was defeated only by the intervention of French troops.

France helped boost the mainly Hutu Rwandan army's strength from 15,000 to 45,000 with help from neighbouring Zaire, Egypt and south Africa.

And the French media has printed testimonies from former Hutu militiamen that French instructors trained them in combat and torture techniques before they went on their recent murderous rampage. Mitterrand maintains that: "One couldn't carry on watching the massacres take place." Generous geostatisticians say France moved in to atone for past sins in Rwanda; unkind critics say French troops are simply trying to protect their Hutu killer friends and get them back into government — even, if necessary, a government dominated by the Tutsis and moderate Hutus of the Patriotic Front.

In the process, Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko, who was also given France's friendship soon after seizing power, has catapulted himself into a key role in the region which has enabled him to consolidate foreign friendships — which could prove useful against his own increasingly restive population.

China: Now, Free Market Funerals

In China, the dead now have a chance to meet their maker in style. Rajiv Chandra of Inter Press Service reports from Beijing

"all had their ashes scattered across the homeland," says Zhang. "This service could also be provided to the common Chinese and enable them to rest their souls in nature."

But Zhang points to another compelling reason to provide the 'water-borne ceremony': the overcrowding of final resting places for urns in Chinese cities.

He says Beijing and Shanghai, where cremation is most popular, are finding it hard to cope with all their cemeteries crammed with urns and caskets. This has reached such proportions that the Beijing crematorium has issued notice that ashes can be stored for only three years at the most.

"From these facts, I realised that people might welcome the idea of scattering ashes in nature," Zhang explains. "It's the best means of solving the 'lack of space'."

But scattering the ashes of their beloved at sea is a novel concept to Chinese who still

favour burying their dead, despite state laws forbidding the practice due to lack of space.

A 1990 official circular says: "More than five million corpses were buried in China every year, which had turned at least 6,700 hectares of cultivated land into burial ground. As a result, some 65,000 farmers had lost their rice lands."

Even then, it is very difficult to change tradition, authorities here admit in private. Says one official: "In the countryside, people still hold elaborate burials, mostly with the local government turning a blind eye."

"During the Cultural Revolution, traditional funerals were strictly forbidden," he adds. "It was only in the 1980s that the prohibition was relaxed and old customs immediately returned without the slightest

change."

"It is difficult to change traditional funeral trends," Zhang admits. "The traditional custom of burial means that it will be a long time before a new service for scattering ashes really takes off."

But he says he is targeting those newly-affluent by the government's market reforms. Zhang is confident his services will appeal to the emerging rich in the cities who want a "special" parting from their beloved one and have the money to make the occasion a memorable one.

A sociologist from a local university says Zhang is on the right track. He points out, "In a changing society, everyone is busy making money, so they have no time to be filial. Thus, to some extent, people would want to use an elaborate fu-

neral as a kind of compensation." Zhang claims the government is keen on seeing his project succeed. The Beijing Notary Office is even notarising the entire ritual for the company, he says. In addition, the state-owned Beijing Insurance Company has agreed to pay 3,000 yuan (US\$343) per urn to cover "ash dispersal or storage accidents".

Zhang says he had to give personal touches to the entire funeral package to make it an attractive marketing proposition. "I was clearly aware that I had to design and deal with the solemn ritual very carefully," he says.

To symbolise the "return to nature", for example, Zhang came up with the intertwined patterns of the globe, sky and sea on the BRSC banner.

Also, the sorrow of the traditional requiems did not covey the beauty of nature, so Zhang commissioned a famous Chinese composer to write a musical dirge for 35,000 yuan

(US\$4,000). Thus, Zhang says proudly: "The first 25-minute Chinese lamentation symphony was born."

Zhang says BRSC is flourishing, attracting even overseas Chinese. He charges them more, though, asking for a US\$600 flat fee for the ceremony, aside from US\$200 for each relative who wants to watch. Relatives to locals pay only the yuan equivalent of US\$23 each to attend.

BRSC also offers an 'air dispersal service' for high-flying deceased, with the ashes dropped from an aircraft. But Zhang says it has proved less popular than the water service, with only ten customers so far choosing to have the ashes of their loved ones strewn from thousands of metres above ground.

Zhang reckons this is because the price tag for the airborne funerals are a bit steep: 800 yuan (US\$91) for domestic customers and US\$800 for overseas Chinese and foreigners.

Still, if you are rich (and dead) in China, that may be the way to go.

To the Editor...

Another monumental handshake

Sir, King Hussain of Jordan and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shook hands with each other in Washington, in presence of the US President Bill Clinton, on 26th July 1994 after signing a declaration ending the 46-year state of war between the two countries.

Earlier, on 13th September 1993, the PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and the Israeli Premier, the two long-time enemies, shook hands with each other after signing the PLO-Israeli peace accord in presence of US President Bill Clinton.

We believe that the success story of the US President Bill

Clinton would be completed and written in letters of gold when he proves that 'charity begins at home' and shakes hands with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

OH Kabir Dhaka

Save Kahn — save architecture

Sir, The parliament building is the pinnacle of a nation's aspiration, achievement and dignity. Bangladesh has been blessed with a building, to hold this function, which truly portrays these attributes.

Bangladesh's National Assembly building by the famous architect Louis Isidore Kahn is considered a wonder in the field of modern architecture. All over the world, in architectural textbooks and journals, the name of Bangladesh appears whenever reference is made to Kahn and his building. The building sym-

bolises our national pride and achievement. Tourists from all over the world come to see it, not to mention scores of people related to the field of architecture.

It is of utmost importance to uphold the general theme of this much talked about architecture. In the past years a number of buildings have been constructed, around the Assembly complex, which are not only conflicting with the scale of the project but also have rendered an extent of damage to the overall visual impact of this building. One such structure is the Shech Bhaban (irrigation building), immediately opposite Manik Mia Avenue. The view of this building from the Parliament building plaza is not only disturbing but it also gives an unwanted look amidst the sober and dignified atmosphere.

There are constructions going on all around the area — most of which do not conform

to the general tone of the precedent set by Louis Kahn. Now there is yet another structure to be built near the Manik Mia Avenue — the jute geo-textile projects building. I wonder whether the plans for this building has ever been evaluated properly to see whether the architecture blends with the theme of the Assembly complex.

In order to preserve the visual and physical sanctity of any great work of architecture, the least we can do is to show some respect to its style and language (of architecture). Haphazard and unchecked development, which do not blend with or complement the general theme of the architecture, can only increase chaos.

It is painful indeed to see a masterpiece being degraded by our inconsiderate and callousness. Louis Kahn's master plan for the Assembly complex also included the secretariat

buildings in the vacant land adjacent to the present Zia Uddin.

During the Ershad regime a scheme was taken up following the 'Guchha Gram' (cluster village) concept (!) to build the secretariat complex here, totally disregarding the famous architect's drawings.

If anything at all is to be built here it should conform with the original drawings of Louis Kahn.

It is so very painstaking to build an architectural masterpiece such as our Parliament building. It doesn't need complements from anybody. Just look at the building — and it'll speak out for itself. Yet the most remarkable and beautiful things are not very hard to destroy — just be a bit ignorant or a bit inconsiderate and some one will do the job for you, — as they are doing right now on the Sangsad Bhaban complex!

We have to stand tall to save this architecture. Abu Sayeed Saleh Dept of Architecture

"Taslima Nasreen Affair..."

Sir, I write to congratulate Ms Yasmeen Murshed, on her excellent piece of writing on Taslima Nasreen (Star 26 July). She may forgive me as at first I had the suspicion that the writers name might be a pseudonym — maybe a male in the garb of a female! The piece was indeed so wellwritten. Please do not think this is male chauvinism!

We entirely show what she says in the article. What we cannot do is to write with such elegance, wit and accuracy of understanding.

Our sincere appreciation once again. Abdul Haq Choudhury Jahangirnagar University Savar, Dhaka