

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali Dhaka, Wednesday, August 10, 1994

Peace-making for Middle East

In its range of dynamism, dimension of contents and directional thrusts, US Secretary of State Warren Christopher's shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East is assuming almost an epochal proportion. Given the largely barren peace-making of yesteryears, barring the controversial Camp David accord between the United States and Egypt, the burgeoning drama in the Middle East is now cutting newer corners in the region. It is a far cry from the post-Gulf war scenario when the memory of a less-than-total Arab participation in the international coalition for the war effort lingered. Arab frontline states with the exception of Saudi Arabia which was the launching-pad for the free-Kuwait mission, led by the US, chose to be neutral because of their legacy of problems with Israel. And at one stage when Tel Aviv became the target of Iraq's scud missile attacks, they turned into more of silent spectators.

Christopher's shuttle diplomacy under the Clinton leadership has seemingly changed all that. It has made possible a hand-shake and an accord between arch foes Israel and the PLO on Palestinian self-rule by phases over some of the Israeli-occupied territories with the crowning return of Yasser Arafat to his homeland. It has also brought to an end 46 years of belligerence between Jordan and Israel. What is even more incredible is a sneaking prospect that the oncepariah Iraq may be involved in multilateral negotiations on security, economic cooperation and water issues as part of the Middle East peace process. Amman has proposed this hoping that since in the security perception of Israel Iraq figures as a factor, its overture to associate Baghdad with the peace process could meet with a US approval, let alone that of her new friend Tel Aviv. Besides, the water sharing issue is a common denominator here, Jordan having its share of this with Israel. However, Baghdad is said to be making its offer of participation in the Middle East peace process conditional upon the lifting of the UN embargo imposed on her following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The west may frown at having to make such a big concession to Baghdad though.

President Hafez Al-Assad is emerging as a tough negotiator on the Golan Heights question demanding that Israel make these over wholly to Syria without much ado. Israel on the other hand has conveyed it to President Assad through the US Secretary of State Warren Christopher that it could transfer only parts of the Golan Heights to Syria and that too on the basis of certain prior understanding regarding security. Syria looks at the issue as one of vacation of its territories which Israel has held in occupation since the 1967 Middle East war. Israel is keen on retaining parts of these with a guarantee for peaceful borders which sound like contradiction in terms to Syria. The two sides are not as yet on talking terms. It is the US Secretary of State who is acting as the mediator. Egypt has tried to bring the two parties across the table preferably for one-toone talks between Assad and Rabin. Direct negotiations can only signal a breaking of the ice.

It is understood that the final peace treaty between Jordan and Israel will be consummated after Syria and Israel signs a peace accord between them. The controversy over the status of East Jerusalem and some other areas in Israeli occupation has to be settled as quickly as possible. Peace may have to be achieved in fragments under certain circumstances, but these must add up to a cohesive whole. For, that is what peace is: indivisible.

A Sherbet Treat!

It happens only in fairytales. But in a country as unpredictable as Bangladesh, fairytales are not altogether absent. They take place in the most unlikely places and situations, throwing a challenge to our rational faculty. Sometimes so bizarre that the incidents would continue to trouble our minds for long. Some twists to a serious event however, can render it quite comical. An incident of the latter category has taken place recently in a village called Dainur near Dinajpur border. Known as a smuggling route, the village has suddenly got a rare treat of a sherbet festival, thanks to the unmeaning generosity of the sugar smugglers there.

A whole pond has turned into a sherbet jar of enormous capacity and the villagers are taking the sweet drink home for sugary treat. It has been possible because of a combination of incidents. Smugglers knowing not what to do with 150 sacks of sugar, only hours before the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) raids on the village, had found the easy way out by dumping the whole lot into the now-turned sherbet pond. They escaped from being caught red handed but in the process sweetened all the water the pond had in it. The BDR men, disappointed as they were, had to be satisfied with the empty sacks. It is in this process that the villagers got something to celebrate not exactly in a bacchanal style but in a Bangladeshi version of the Greek festival.

Surely, the excessive sweet content was not to the liking of the permanent residents of that pond. All the aquatic animals, chiefly fish, died. They served the purpose of sacrificial animals all right. However, the report is not clear about the population of fish in that pond. Who does not know that great festivals of the human beings call for sacrifice of lives of the lesser animals? So the owner of the pond might not be particularly sad for the loss. He has after all been ordained by providence to be the host of the great festivity. He too might join the joyous bands of villagers in the revelry

Well, the smugglers are the real losers in the process. They did invent a way out. But the solution is the last one they had opted for. They are known for all kinds of ingenuous plans and tricks to outfox the men in uniform. The law-breakers are doing immense harm to the country by carrying out their illegal operation across the border. The more they are made to suffer the better for the country. But even at times when the network of vice suffers, its potential of poisoning society and life is quite high. In this case the villagers have got a sherbet treat free of cost, but indiscreet drinking of the sugary water might be the cause of an epidemic like stomach ailment of the villagers. They should indeed thank their stars if they can avert it at a time of such diseases' high incidence.

es it quite clear that the twin preoccupations of international media are -sensationalism and "anti-Muslims", if I may be permit-

ted to use the world. Sensationalism in its most virulent form, the prurient and merciless attention of the "paparazzi", has devastated the lives and loves of many people all over the world. Rock and film stars, sports heroes, presidents, royalty, not least the British Royal Family have all been victims of this intrusive and destructive force despite the fact that generally speak ing most people find this sort of sensationalism distasteful and say so in the letters columns of newspapers and

magazines. With the spotlight on our own infamous feminine novelist, we too have felt the heat of its light and can sympathize with its other victims. In our case the media has made its second priority quite apparent that is, the extravagant attention paid to any instance or situation where Muslims or Islam can be criticized, justifiably or not. That this priority outweighs all other considerations of privacy, decency and courtesy, not to mention humanity and a sense of judgement, has been amply demonstrated on numerous occasions. For instance, just last week the BBC ran the story of Taslima Nasreen's appearance in court and release on bail as the first item in the evening news. When thousands are dying in Rwanda daily and the open sore of Bosnia is bleeding all over Europe, does an obscure novelist in Bangladesh

HAKA has grown over the years without a comprehensive town planning exercise in its background. Most of its new areas that were allowed to come up literally neglected are served with very few secondary roads but lanes and by-lanes Having found the provisions in the area not meeting their daily necessities the residents here dash to the main thoroughfare that touches the area for variety of purposes. Places like Rayerbazar, Kathalbagan, Malibagh, Shahidbag, Rampura Maghbazar, Kachukhet and scores of other areas are the living examples. Lots of new buildings have either come up or are in the process of coming up having least regard to their approach roads. Lanes and by-lanes here are narrow. erratic, inconsistent with the local needs besides some being blind alley. Thus the main road remains crowded for greater part of the day. Problem is further compounded when some construction activities are carried out along the road for installation of some utility ser vice lines. Most of the thoroughfares in the metropolis are not as wide as to accommodate all categories of vehicles, including rickshaws, in addition to leaving a row for roadside parking. Situation could have been redeemed with adequate number of secondary roads to diversify economic activities. Dhaka cannot be proud of an efficient traffic regulation system that some of the big south Asian cities have. where the traffic volumes are few times higher if the rickshaws are kept out of reckoning. Moreover, traffic rules in those cities are far more rigorously implemented than what we see in Dhaka.

Fare Meters

The cabs and autorickshaws that ply the streets of Dhaka

HE coverage of the Taslima Nasreen case mak-

answer is obviously ves because it gives them the opportunity to indulge in an orgy of hyste-Muslim about Fundamentalism! Even a cursory review of the facts of the case shows that the entire Taslima Nasreen affair was created by the West Bengal press then taken up and blown out of proportion by the Indian and subsequently the world media. What excuse is there for this except that it is a chance to get in a good bit of "Muslim bashing". Ironically Taslima herself has, on the one hand been basking in the approval of the BJP who are as fundamentalist as a party can get and on the other being championed by Western Freedom of Speech liberals whose reaction to Islam stems from an atavistic fear inherited from the Crusaders. Their comments and opinions are so naive, facile and ill informed that I find it difficult to believe that they are serious. Salman Rushdie's open letter to Taslima was a masterpiece of self righteousness and pom-

religion.

tention?

sentative of Bangladeshi public

opinion nor taken seriously by

most reasonable persons in the

For the Western media the

country, merit this kind of at-

posity while the Washington and the feeble death threats Post in great indignation said made by minor right wing groups, who are neither repre-, "Murder is Murder, Mr

Ambassador" in reply to the Bangladeshi envoy's letter pointing out that the lady in question is a Bangladeshi citizen to whom the law of the land is being applied just as it would be to any one of us if we were guilty of breaking the law of the land in any country for

I cannot help but agree that read Taslima's writing knows) this entire region. The ensuffered because the internaist activities and carry out barbaric punishments, not necessarily in that order!

ing "Islamic Terrorists." any

Anti-Muslim Bias in International Media

by Yasmin Murshed

Why do we never hear of Serbian Christians or Irish Catholic Separatists or Jewish Fundamentalist

Settlers.... Oh no, those appellations are not really necessary, only Muslims have to be distinguished by their

whatever reason.

murder is murder but so far all that has been "murdered" has been our literary sensibilities las any one who has tried to and most tragically Bangladesh's record for tolerance and non-communalism which was perhaps the best in deavours of many Bangladeshi women (and men) to achieve meaningful development for themselves and for their less privileged sisters which was the basis for the "feminist" cause in Bangladesh has been murdered and the image of Bangladesh the world over has tional press is out to prove that all Muslims can do is oppress their women, engage in terror-

Any minor incident involv-

wife or two and the stereotyping begins. The "anti-Muslimism", often by implication and sometimes openly, portrays Muslims as unsavoury and unreliable characters and of course as "fundamentalist" which in this vocabulary is, equal to bigotry and fanaticism. have almost ceased to be astonished by the double standards which justify the prejudice displayed by these holierthan-us advocates of Liberty and Freedom, who are just as guilty of bigotry as any funda-

mentalist. Why do we never

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domestic fracas involving one

distinguished by their religion. Well, so be it. I for one am proud and happy to be called a Muslim fundamentalist because I believe that the fundamental values of humility, charity and submission to Allah are the true essence of Islam. As a Bangladeshi I am equally proud to have inherited the traditions of education, culture and civilization which have taught us to be tolerant and open minded and given us the ability to be equally at home in the East or the West.

Bangladesh is, in this the last decade of the twentieth

century, undergoing great social transitions and changes and many of the established dimensions of our lives have to be redefined as we seek to reconcile our traditional values and ways of life with the demands of a technological world. There are issues that we have to resolve ourselves such as questions of religious observances, social structures, legal systems and all that is pertinent to civilization. The consequences of rapid modernisation and development such as the role of NGO's in national life, the issues of empowering women and the less privileged and the effect of this on our culture and social norms, are all matters that we as a country and a society should discuss. There are yet other fundamental questions of "choice" which have not been seriously debated in our country - whether we should have limits to free speech such as legislation against blasphemy. how much choice should a so-

The champions of freedom of speech will say that freedom itself creates human dignity, but I disagree. There are limits to free speech everywhere because most people agree that Freedom is not the license to

ciety have, what is "freedom'

and do we want freedom of

speech and thought at the cost

of human dignity?

pleases about everything. In fact in the every countries which advocate the cause of Free Speech libel, slander and privacy laws are much more strictly enforceable than in Bangladesh thus setting effective limits to freedom of speech. The question therefore is what degree of restriction should be put on a persons' right to speak his or her mind and if that restriction is not observed what punishment is appropriate.

do or say exactly what one

As I said earlier it should be our debate, our discussion and ultimately our decision. If we choose our course wrongly we will learn the lessons of time as other societies have done before us and will or will not change when we reach the crossroads of decision making again. Nevertheless we must undertake the exercise and the only way to do so is to ignore the distractions that arise in the shape of the Taslima '. Nasreen's and the unwelcome attentions of Western Media

Of course we also have to hope that soon Michael Jackson will be accused of molesting another young boy or that the glamorous Princess Di will talk indiscreetly to yet another "friend" or that O J Simpson will confess to a double murder on Prime Time TV or even that another Jennifer Flowers will lay siege to the White House so that those sensations will divert attention from sleepy little Bangladesh and we will be able to get on with our lives in peace!

The author is. Director. Centre for Analysis and Choice.

Dhaka Traffic — II

There Must be Some Control Everywhere

by M Khaled Khan

on hire are not provided with fare meters. Whatever the drivers charge is put to bargain and finally negotiated. No standard unit rates could be established so far to give the negotiation a legal basis. Attempts were made during the regimes of late Ziaur Rahman and Ershad to introduce faremeter to auto rickshaws but all efforts proved fruitless in no time due to absence of follow-up actions. The offenders safely got away with the crimes throwing the meters out of their vehicles and the government remained a passive by-stander to see the sad demise of their popular policy decision. No effort was made at any later stage to reintroduce fare meters for au-

torickshaws and taxi cabs. As I have mentioned earlier, most of bus stoppages are located either at the mad intersection points or very close to it. I do not know what traffic rules would say about the locations of stoppages with respect to the roads. Nevertheless, I am positive that the present arrangement will not work. These stoppages are to be relocated based on meticulous judgement of the volume and nature of traffic. Parking arrangement of private vehicles in the commercial places, during busy hours, leaves much to be desired. After parking of vehicles and rickshaws covering half the road width very little space is left for smooth movement of traffic. Such condition on any important road coupled with the inconvenience created due to illogical location of bus stoppages has all ingredients of causing a messy situation. Worse still are

the places where the cinema halls and shopping centres are located on the main road. Left with no parking space vehicles stopping at these locations have no option other than parking at the road side no matter what the road width is. And traffic jam is inevitable.

Tangible Formula Needed

Now, to remove the causes of traffic jam Dhaka City Corporation. Metropolitan Police and other concerned government and private organisations should put their heads together to work out a tangible formula and set the ball rolling. Before that, 'no parking' signal may be hung in places like cinema halls, supermarkets and wherever deemed necessary and any infringement of the rule shall be made punishable. The supermarkets having no parking facilities of their own must pay surcharge to the City Corporation to obtain a right to let their customers drop at their locations and leave the transport to move away for parking in the designated places. No rickshaw shall be allowed parking close to a supermarket or cinema hall They will wait only in the stands earmarked for them. Vendors must not be allowed to occupy the road or footpath to sell their merchandise except where such activities are allowed by the City Corporation. A strong iron railing may be erected along the edge of the portion of the footpaths that fall in front of every supermarket or cinema hall in order to let the visitors

walk for a distance away from the entrance point of such commercial ventures.

Parking of vehicles both private and commercial, is an issue which everybody is concerned with. Most of the private buildings in the commercial areas do not have parking space of their own. So, quite often two rows of parking are seen on either side of a major road thus creating obvious obstacles to smooth flow of traffic. It should, therefore, be made mandatory for every vehicle owner seeking parking facilities in commercial areas to park his vehicle in areas earmarked for parking.

Gulistan Terminal Gulistan and Fulbaria terminals with their present status are certainly not ideal places for parking of commercial vehicles. All the buses that ply within the city or coming from suburban areas stop here for return trip. The people who use these two terminals for catching a bus or are required to pass through them find it very difficult to negotiate in midst of galaxy of buses parked or idling in an erratic fashion. No passenger shed has been erected anywhere in these two terminals to relieve the passengers of their miseries. The City Corporation took no pains to prepare comprehensive plan on the utilization of the invaluable land that fell vacant due to Railway's withdrawal and was made over to them. It wasted the space by venturing some lousy half complete edifice presumably meant for shopping centres — a scheme

tation in its life time. They should have thought of converting the whole Fulbaria Station into a modern bus terminal with adequate provisions for parking space and charging fees for parking facilities. The DMP also could have come up with an action plan to regulate the traffic in the city's busiest area where no semblance of discipline exists at the moment.

apparently not for implemen-

The road, in front of Banga Bhavan, that had once been open to all after liberation was declared out of bound for vehicular traffic eversince the political change over in 1975. During Ershad's regime some architectural features were built across the road denying any thorough traffic movement. The present democratic government may review the issue of reopening the road to all types of traffic. This action will, indeed, ease the pressure on Motifheel Road.

Level Crossings

The railway track that has passes through the heart of the city has more than 15 level crossings, big and small, within the city area. So when a train leaves or approaches Kamlapur station, all the level crossing gates remain closed.

It becomes a very interesting subject of study if we take a look at the scene that ensues at each of these big level crossings following the departure of a train. Khilgaon crossing scenario is the worst of all. Such bizarre scene is repeated at least 30 times a day to the utter disgust of the people staying in Khilgaon, Bashabo,

Madartek etc. I cannot think of a situation when due to increase in frequency of trains these gates will remain closed most of the time in a day and will leave little or no time for the people from one side of the track reaching the other side riding a rickshaw, tempo. bus or car. This is perhaps the reason why the construction of fly overs brooks no delay.

Lots have been said about the traffic system of the metropolitan capital city. There are lots of others that merit attention. Marked improvement of the deplorable situation may not be in sight in the foreseeable future. But pessimism has no place. Some drastic measures have to be taken by the appropriate authority under the leadership of the Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation on whom the residents of Dhaka have reposed their faith to guide their destiny. In Addition to what has been recommended in this write-up, few more actions as given hereunder need to be

(a) Population influx in the metropolis must be resisted.

(b) The City Corporation should prepare a plan for a network of secondary roads in all the areas which are densely populated and where such

roads are not existing. (c) Infrastructural facilities like water, electricity, gas and sewerage must be ensured to all those who

need them. (d) Rickshaw, auto rickshaw and car parking areas must be earmarked on top

priority basis. (e) Sitting areas for vendors must be defined and police must keep a vigil so that laws are strictly ad-

the series of Grameen Bank's

hered to.

(Concluded)

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.

Role of NGOs

Sir, The Director General of the NGO Affairs Bureau has relieved the confusion from the public mind by clearly refuting the allegations against NGOs that they are indulged in antireligious activities. The general people of the country, especially those with a progressive attitude, are very much aware of the developmental works undertaken by the NGOs (as in the fields of education, skill development, provision of credit, social forestry, etc) to promote people's welfare and reduce the level of poverty, in various places in Bangladesh, specially in the remote villages.

However, the recent allegations of so-called fundamentalists against the NGOs and the silent role of the government have confused people like us who started doubting whether the NGOs are really indulged in anti-religious activities. The statement of the DG has very appropriately clarified and confirmed the harmless and beneficial role of the NGOs which hopefully will restore their good reputation earned by their hard and commend-

able work. I congratulate Mr M A Mannan for his clear and honest statement which has 'washed out the confusion disturbing the common people of the country regarding NGO affairs. Such statements are welcome from responsible government officials so that we, the general public, can have a clear view of the picture and form an objective opinion without being motivated or confused by the illmotivated propaganda of the reactionary forces.

Bilkis Banu Dep't of Sociology Dhaka University

Animals and human beings

Sir, There was a news in different dailies on 16th July, 1994 about a lion starving himself to death after killing his trainer. I think this news offers much food for thought for human beings.

The trainer did not belong to his own species still the lion mourned for him. But what do we see in the human domain? Human beings are murdering their own kind ruthlessly in one frenzy or another. They even do not hesitate to kill "one's own flesh and blood"

When people act cruelly we tend to compare them with animals, but to me it seems most unjustified. Animals do

not kill for killing's sake, they do it to defend themselves, to appease hanger and sometimes to take revenge for the death of a dear member of the same species. As they cannot use weapons, they have to use their teeth and claws, thus it is termed as savagery. Though human beings are devouring and continually preying on the lives of other living creatures including their own kind, we tend not to look upon it as

So, we should stop referring to any sordid act caused by humans as an animal act. because animals as it seems are more humane than human beings at most of the times.

Nur Jahan East Nasirabad, Chittagong

cruelty.

Tomato in summer

Sir. Tomato is a winter vegetable and does not grow in summer. But a breakthrough has been made for its growth in summer by dint of research and experiment at BARI's Agricultural Research Station in Thakurgaon. It has been under experiment for the last two years and following an intensive research, the agriculturists have come out successful by growing tomatoes in summer from two varieties of seeds obtained from Asian Vegetable Research and Development Centre (AVRDC), Taiwan.

The tomato seeds were sown in March and in April and later on transplanted with different kinds of fertilisers. In May, the plants began flowering and then the fruits grew The yield per hectare was 42

and 39 tons from these two varieties of seeds, both ripe

and green. Summer tomatoes are being regularly planted and grown in Taiwan the Philippines and Thailand. A daily 2/3 times spray of a special type of hormone is a must without which the flowering will not occur.

The heat and drought tolerancy of the plant, temperature range, soil texture and climatic show that conditions Thakurgaon region is ideally suited for summer tomato, along with Joydebpur. Though BARI has approved three varieties for cultivation at farmer's level, but basically it remains at research level. It may take time to popularise the cultivation of summer tomato among the farmers. Above all, for commercial cultivation, a question of marketing shall remain as vital as growing.

I got this information from a friend of mine who works at

N H Sufi Mohammadpur, Dhaka

SAARC spirit indeed

Sir, While the SAARC Council of Ministers were holding a two-day meeting in Dhaka to work out a fresh action programme aiming at widening cooperation among the member countries some Indian bureaucrats with the help of Border Security Force (BSF) were constructing a road along Indian Kuchlibari border defying the protest made by Bangladesh and violating the protocol signed between

Bangladesh and India not to construct roads within 150 yards of no man's land.

We would like to request

the Indian State Minister for External Affairs Mr R L Bhatia who was our guest, to kindly enlighten us as to why New Delhi is interested in creating more and more new problems, one after another? Why India does not come forward to solve two decades old Ganges water sharing issue with us and many other bilateral problems with most of the SAARC countries? How long would the Indian apathy towards Bangladesh and other SAARC countries continue and why? Is not India vitiating the spirit of SAARC anyway?

Let New Delhi follow a neat clean and pristine foreign policy to solve all the bilateral problems with her neighbours and make the mission of SAARC a success.

O H Kabir Dha**k**a-1203

'Does the Capitalist System ..."

Sir, I had had the opportunity of reading quite a few books and articles, including the exhaustive dissertation by BIDS's erstwhile DG Dr. Mahbub Hossain, on the Grameen Bank. But after I have read the article captioned "Does the Capitalist System Have to be the Handmaiden of the Rich?" by Prof Muhammad Yunus, published in the July 3 and 4 issues of your esteemed daily, I am left wondering how much more I am yet to learn to fathom the secrets underlying

success stories. In a country, where ingenuity or even the penchant for slightly departing from the beaten track is either rare to come by or summarily dismissed by referring to what are called precedents, but what are mostly the other names for a series of failures, Grameen Fisheries Foundation, as it has been modeled, can, for example, indeed bring about a miracle in its almost virgin sector of inland fisheries, in the prospect of which we are said to be second to none in the whole world. For heaven's sake, let us stop waiting for the time when some "greedy' entrepreneur, as Prof Yunus terms him, will discover our inland fisheries sector, at present trapped in two million idle ponds, as a source of minting money and learn to look forward to who are known as "why-notters" instead of "not-nowers" and "yes-butters" at the decision making and implementation levels. We have had enough of our own varieties of "not-nowers" and "yes-butters" and seen what they could do for the country. Let us give a chance to the "why-notters". It is they, people endowed with vision and innovative faculties people with a ceaseless feeling of unhappiness over the "existing" state of affairs — who can move the world. To speak of this juggernaut of a country burdened with a myriad of problems - all calling for urgent solution -, they are sorely needed. Fazlul Kabir 6/12 Baily Square.

Dhaka