

Towards a Solution of Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict

Arshad-uz-Zaman writes from Istanbul

HERE are persistent signals that the eight years old Armenian-Azerbaijani war which has caused the loss of thousands of lives on both sides, may be winding down at last. The war has also led to Armenian occupation of nearly one fifth of Azeri territory.

The hopeful signals are currently all coming from the US, which Armenian President Ter Petrosyan is currently visiting. Ilham Aliev, son of President Haider Aliev of Azerbaijan, who is involved in oil politics of this country, is also in the US at present. The Carnegie Endowment of New York, organised a seminar and the keynote speaker was President Ter Petrosyan and among the guests was Hafiz Pashayev, Azerbaijan Ambassador to Washington. From the Turkish side a name that is regularly popping up is Ali Riza Bozkurt,

nicknamed the 'Amazing Turk', who also is involved in a pipeline deal of Azeri oil, that should pass through Armenia. Bozkurt, who also has American nationality, has expressed his intention to run for US senate from New Jersey in 1996 elections.

During his US visit Ter Petrosyan has sounded positively upbeat about a solution to the conflict, between his country and neighbour Azerbaijan. The heart of the conflict is the tiny enclave Nagorno-Karabakh, which is within Azerbaijan territory and largely populated by Armenians. In an unilateral move Armenia has pushed Azeri forces out of Karabakh and has marched deep into Azeri territory. There is a fragile ceasefire at present and Azerbaijan is insisting on withdrawal of Armenian forces from her territory before she would con-

sent to any bargaining. Both republics are members of Moscow sponsored Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Russia is playing a leading role in finding a solution. At issue is the question of stationing of troops to separate the combatants and Azerbaijan is wary of any large scale stationing of Russian troops, whom she sent home following declaration of independence three years ago.

Heavy Economic Cost

The economic cost of the war to both Armenia and Azerbaijan has been heavy. Outside of the dislocation caused by the collapse of command economy, Azerbaijan has seen her exports shrink dramatically. Energy hungry Armenia has been living on very little

electricity and her standard of living is reported to have fallen by 70%. The war has caused one million Azeris to flee their homes.

Turkey has a large stake in a negotiated solution to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Emotionally Turkish speaking Muslim Azeris are much closer to them than Armenians. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Turkic republics, it is with Azerbaijan that Turkey established special relations. Turkey is also keen to maintain good relations with all others of the region including Armenia, through which she has land route carrying her merchandise to consumer goods hungry Caucasus and Central Asia. Since the Azeris suffered military reverses in the hands of Armenians, Turkey has been

compelled to impose economic sanctions against Armenia. Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller has announced that she would be prepared to establish diplomatic and economic relations with Armenia, once Armenian troops withdraw from Azerbaijan territory.

Pipeline Politics

Lately pipeline politics has become one of major planks of Turkish Foreign Policy. She has been campaigning energetically for the reopening of Iraqi pipeline which carries oil from Kerkuk in northern Iraq to Yumurtalik in Turkish Mediterranean. Riyad Al-Qaysi, Iraqi Foreign Ministry Undersecretary, who has just completed a visit to Turkey, has been reported to have successfully reopened negotiations for the reopening of Iraqi pipeline. The matter, it is confidently predicted, will come before

the Security Council soon for a positive outcome. Turkey has also been making strenuous efforts to transport oil and gas from Turkic republics through pipeline to her Mediterranean ports.

Latest events surrounding Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict demonstrate that economic interests are becoming the dominant factors in search for a solution. Whereas US seems content to allow Russia a large role due to her long standing interests in the region, her large oil companies seem to make deep inroads in the reported large reserve of Azeri oil. Turkey and Iran, the two regional powers, who have long standing religious and cultural interests and now emerging economic interests, are also engaged in finding a solution which would protect their interests.

Chips are Down in Bosnia

Everything about the Bosnian Serbs has been self-proclaimed: the territorial authority they claim, their so-called Parliament and, last but not least, the referendum they held last weekend. So, an incurable defiance of the international norms has been writ large on their actions — from the day one. And as it was sown so has it been reaped now — through the referendum whereby the Bosnian Serbs have rejected out of hand the international peace plan, so assiduously put together by the USA, Russia, France, Britain and Germany. This was a last-ditch initiative to stop the bleeding in the Balkans.

The peace plan seeks to rationalise the land distribution among the Muslims, Croats and Serbs which was badly distorted by a Serbian annexation in the tyrannical name of ethnic-cleansing. The land partitioning envisaged in the plan falls short of the ideal because the Muslim and Croat Federation, though in a clear majority, is to receive 51 per cent of the territory. They have no grouse; it is a sacrifice they are ready to make. By contrast, the minority Serbs are to get 49 per cent in what appears to be a partial legitimization of their seizure of land by force amounting to 70 per cent of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In an ingenious gimmickry the Bosnian Serb leaders are saying that they are opposed to the mapping not the peace plan as such. The division will not make them into a 'viable state' as it would prevent them from merging with Serbia which obviously bears portents of further destabilisation in the area. But it is the Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic who cut off supplies to his once surrogate Bosnian Serb leadership because they denounced the peace plan. Even though Milosevic might be suspected of doing it as a ploy to obtain withdrawal of trade sanctions by the west imposed on his republic for its part in the conflict, he is very much on record as having endorsed the peace plan. At any rate the peace sponsors have apparently seen through it to say to Milosevic that the lifting of sanctions is conditional upon the Bosnian Serbs' unqualified acceptance of the peace proposals. The ball is in Milosevic's court.

It is an extra-ordinary phenomenon today that a small entity can afford to be so defiant of international will. The Bosnian Serbs are risking isolation in their own area and from their traditional allies — the non-Bosnian Serbs, let alone Russia with its Slovak association. As for the west, its stigma for being soft to the Christian Serbs' as against the Bosnian Muslims seems to have been obscured by some positive moves it has made. The rumblings for punishing the abusers of human rights also are no longer heard. Despite all this change in the atmospherics — the Bosnian Serbs should only thank their stars — they are being mindlessly obdurate. Are they relying on some support secretly coming their way? But they seem to have burnt all their boats.

Ethno-centric nationalism is not only a conceptual possibility, it has also been a potent reality in some parts of the world today. Left within its perimeter, the phenomenon is not so dangerous. But mixed with religion it can be monstrous.

It is the fall-out of their saying 'no' to the peace plan that the world leadership must now prepare itself to face. If any further attempts fail to secure the Bosnia Serbs' compliance with the peace plan the world will be left with no other choice but to lift the arms embargo on the Bosnian Muslims to aid them in the exercise of their right to self-defence. The UN forces must, under no circumstances, abdicate their responsibilities in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

No Serious Games

In the absence of world's traditional sports superpowers, the Commonwealth Games cannot naturally be more than just a poor shadow of the Olympics. Yet the presence of the likes of Australia — a swimming powerhouse, Nigeria and Kenya — two track giants, and Britain and Canada — still a force to reckon with in the athletic field, at times transports some of the events to an olympian height. Or, at least should do so, considering the potential. But as the just-concluded 15th Commonwealth Games would give the unmistakable impression, the sporting gala, like the loose band of nations, with a common colonial past, is gradually falling in stature and losing the competitive edge, once its distinctive mark.

The gradual decline of the games has been succinctly summed up by Australian team spokesman Ian Hanson — the only team to have put up a grand performance — like this: "We're getting better, but maybe the rest are getting worse." The condition is further corroborated by no more than just one record-breaking performance in the swimming pool by an ace Australian swimmer, Kieren Perkins during the entire meet. Certainly this could be bettered, had some of the athletes, known as heavyweights in their respective specialities, not escaped the meet in Victoria, Canada, the venue of the 15th Commonwealth Games.

This sounds intriguing. But those who are familiar with the way of super and mega stars can see the reason of their skipping less prestigious meets with even lesser lure of money. Adding a Commonwealth laurel to their feather comes second to their concern for the fat purse. Surprisingly, those nations can still afford to miss their big names and yet take away home medals from the games. What it means is neither savouring for the rest or the games proper. The message is loud and clear: there is a sea of difference between the competing athletes from different nations of the Commonwealth.

What is even more alarming is that instead of the gap in the athletes' qualities getting narrowed, it is widening. If not, inconsistencies mar the prospect of nations like Bangladesh. Seldom do such nations realize that sports and games have to be tended like a culture through a continuous process. There is a lesson to be learnt not from an outsider but from the top Commonwealth sporting nation itself. Australia's haul of medals in the Olympics and other world meets is always impressive. It did not take the games at Victoria lightly. If Australia is serious, cannot nations like us take the events even more seriously. Last time we had a share of golds and the raised hopes this time have plunged into despair. This should give a double impetus for our success next time.

Three Years after the Gulf War: Straws Tell which Way the Wind Blows

by A M M Shahabuddin

IN the backdrop of the routine renewal, after every two months, by UN Security Council of the economic sanctions against war-ravaged Iraq for the last four years, there appears some sparks in the gradually emerging dim silver line on the Iraqi horizon. The last meeting of the Security Council, held in July, to review the situation, has shown for the first time in last four years clear signs of cracks in the unanimity among the Security Council's five permanent members vis-a-vis further extension of the UN embargo. While the United States and Great Britain favour further continuation of the sanctions, Russia and France wait gradual easing of it as they have "noted" remarkable improvement in Iraq's "behaviour" with UN weapons inspectors. Actually, the group, led by Russia, wanted the Council to issue a "unanimous statement publicly acknowledging" Iraq's full cooperation with UN in implementing its resolutions, which would have been a key step in getting the sanctions lifted. But it couldn't materialise. There were definite proverbial slips between the cup and the lips. Alas today's Russia is not yesterday's Soviet Union! So it had to stop short of what it wanted, until a more congenial situation was forthcoming.

However, this apparent difference of opinion among the council members is indeed a healthy opening for Iraq. Outside the Security Council there are other ominous signals to show a definite change in the policy of the Gulf War participants towards Iraq, particularly some of the Arab and non-Arab Muslim countries who were deeply involved in

the Gulf War.

Ray of Hope for Iraq
In fact, the first such signs were visible when George Bush threatened to bomb Iraq and actually bombed Baghdad killing innocent people on the flimsy grounds of violation of the so-called 'no-fly' zones in the north and south of Iraq and that operation was carried out without any UN authorisation. Naturally, some of the closest allies of Bush, namely Egypt and Turkey, distanced themselves from the renewed US policy of air strikes. The drifting of the allied powers seems to be continuing. According to a recent Iraqi news agency report, Iraq has signed some 540 trade agreements with foreign companies during the last six months, anticipating the possible lifting of the UN sanctions in near future. These foreign companies include, French, Italian, Turkish and Canadian.

Meanwhile, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister had been touring some of the important world capitals to mobilise world opinion in favour of Iraqi campaign for lifting the sanctions. Another important development on the scenario is Saddam Hussein's offer of 'security and peace' to the neighbouring Arab states in a speech marking the 26th anniversary of his ruling Baath Party's coming into power. Still a fact is a fact. For his utter folly or too much ambition, Saddam Hussein and his people had to pay through their noses. They had undergone and are still undergoing tremendous suffering, economic and otherwise, because of a wrong move by Saddam. That is why Iraq was condemned world wide when it invaded a sovereign member

state of the UN, violating the principles enunciated in its charter. Whatever justification Saddam might have come up with, but aggression of a member state of the UN by another member state is a crime against humanity. And that can't go unpunished.

But that doesn't mean that a bully boy, taking advantage of this, would jump in, urging others to join his bandwagon, to pulverise Iraq in the name of liberating Kuwait. As they say the higher the monkey climbs, the more it shows its tail. Nobody could fully support the chief architect of the 'Operation Desert Storm', when the long tail was gradually visible. Particularly, when Bush caught hold of the UN, got whatever resolutions he wanted to fulfil his mission, put these resolutions in his hip pocket, and raised the Desert Storm to bring down hell on Iraq.

Half Truth or Total Lies

Fact is always stranger than fiction. But sometimes a fiction is also stranger than a fact. We have seen this during the Gulf War when the western propaganda stories were dished out through the 'wartime controlled' western media, particularly the so called free press and media of the USA.

Let us see what a columnist of leading Canadian daily *The Toronto Star* had to say about these myths. He said: "Nobody forgets the horror stories about the Kuwaiti babies being yanked from their incubators by beastly Iraqi invaders — even though it turned out that these stories were blatantly phony, fabricated by a public relations agency." Such fictitious stories created more

dense smoke screen to carry on the unabated brutality on Iraq. UN has already admitted, in a report, that Iraq had been bombed 'back to pre industrial stage.' But the most shameful thing on the part of the UN was that it had not only adopted scores of resolutions for unending punitive action against Iraq, but did it in a 'yours truly' manner. All the time echoing Bush's will in a most ridiculous way. Was it not a somewhat hacked attempt of 'corrupting' the UN? "How many of us are vividly aware right now of the real horror of the daily life as a result of the UN sanctions?" asks a columnist of a Canadian daily. And the UN has kept mum all through.

International Tribunal Brings Charges

The day of reckoning is fast approaching. Nature abhors vacuum. And it reacts sharply. So one day history will give its verdict on the crimes committed by Bush and 'allies' in the name of liberating Kuwait. In the post Gulf War euphoria when Bush was riding high on 80 per cent popularity index, there was a move for the trial of Bush for the "monstrous crimes" in Iraq. An unofficial international tribunal was set up with the former Attorney General of the USA, Ramsey Clark, as its chairman. The 22-member tribunal on the other hand, appointed a Commission of Enquiry to gather testimony and information related to the crimes. It worked for about 12 months in 20 countries for this purpose. Even Mr. Ramsey, who travelled extensively inside Iraq, during the war, gathered valuable infor-

mation about the atrocities committed on the civilian population there. After the completion of its work, the Enquiry Commission submitted its report to the tribunal for consideration.

The final meeting of the 22-member tribunal, consisting of prominent citizens drawn from five continents, was held in New York at the beginning of 1993 at the Martin King Jr Auditorium before some 1500 distinguished people.

The following are some of the charges, brought about by the Tribunal, based on the findings of the Enquiry Commission, against George Bush:

— The US engaged in a pattern of conduct... intended to lead Iraq into provocation justifying US military action against Iraq and permanent US domination of the Gulf.

— President Bush ordered the destruction of factories essential to civilian life and economic productivity throughout Iraq.

— The US intentionally bombed civilian life, commercial and business districts, schools, hospitals, mosques, churches, shelters, residential areas, historical sites, private vehicles, and civilian government offices.

— The US forces even killed Iraqi soldiers seeking to surrender.

— The US used prohibited weapons capable of mass destruction, causing indiscriminate death and unnecessary suffering.

— The US "corrupted and exploited UN functions as a means of securing power to commit crimes against peace."

— The US launched a "campaign of media control

and misinformation."

But the most tragic part of the whole episode is that while the western press, particularly the US press, gave extensive coverage to the concocted stories of Iraqi brutalities on the Kuwaiti new born babies in hospitals, they simply resorted to 'blank out' the coverage of the work and sessions of the tribunal. One Canadian columnist, while commenting on the charges brought against Bush and others by the tribunal said: "Saddam Hussein may be a despicable, second rate despot, but George Bush is no hero despite his posing... the truth is that Bush and closest to him will one day be judged by history as war criminals guilty of crimes more monstrous than those of Saddam Hussein himself."

But how long the post Gulf War horrors will continue in Iraq? As noted earlier, the definite change in the posture of some of the permanent Members of the Security Council gives a new ray of hope. Now it all depends on President Clinton who has already shown much thrust and innovation in his foreign policy.

In fact, Clinton has rescued the fallen image of the US as a global power from the quagmire created by his predecessor. Let President Clinton put a straw in the wind and it will tell him which way the world opinion is moving. And a hint is enough for the wise to follow it. Art is long but time is short. Let not America miss this chance to right the wrong, before the evil shadow lengthens further to eclipse its goodwill.

The writer is a retired UN official.

Pastor Quandt Opens the Church Doors and Defies the State

Paul Hockenkos writes from Berlin

EXACTLY on clock, the tiny congregation of the Paul Gerhardt Parish begins Sunday morning service with the first hymn. The sound of organ music stirs Jose from his adjacent room, where the 19-year-old Angolan refugee has lived for three months. He attracts little notice as he joins the two-dozen worshippers from the affluent Berlin suburb, taking a seat in the back row.

"The parish accepts Jose as our guest," says Protestant Pastor Dieter Clausert, who has offered the spare room to different refugees over the past 10 years. "Even if his application for political asylum is rejected, he will have a safe place here until something else can be worked out."

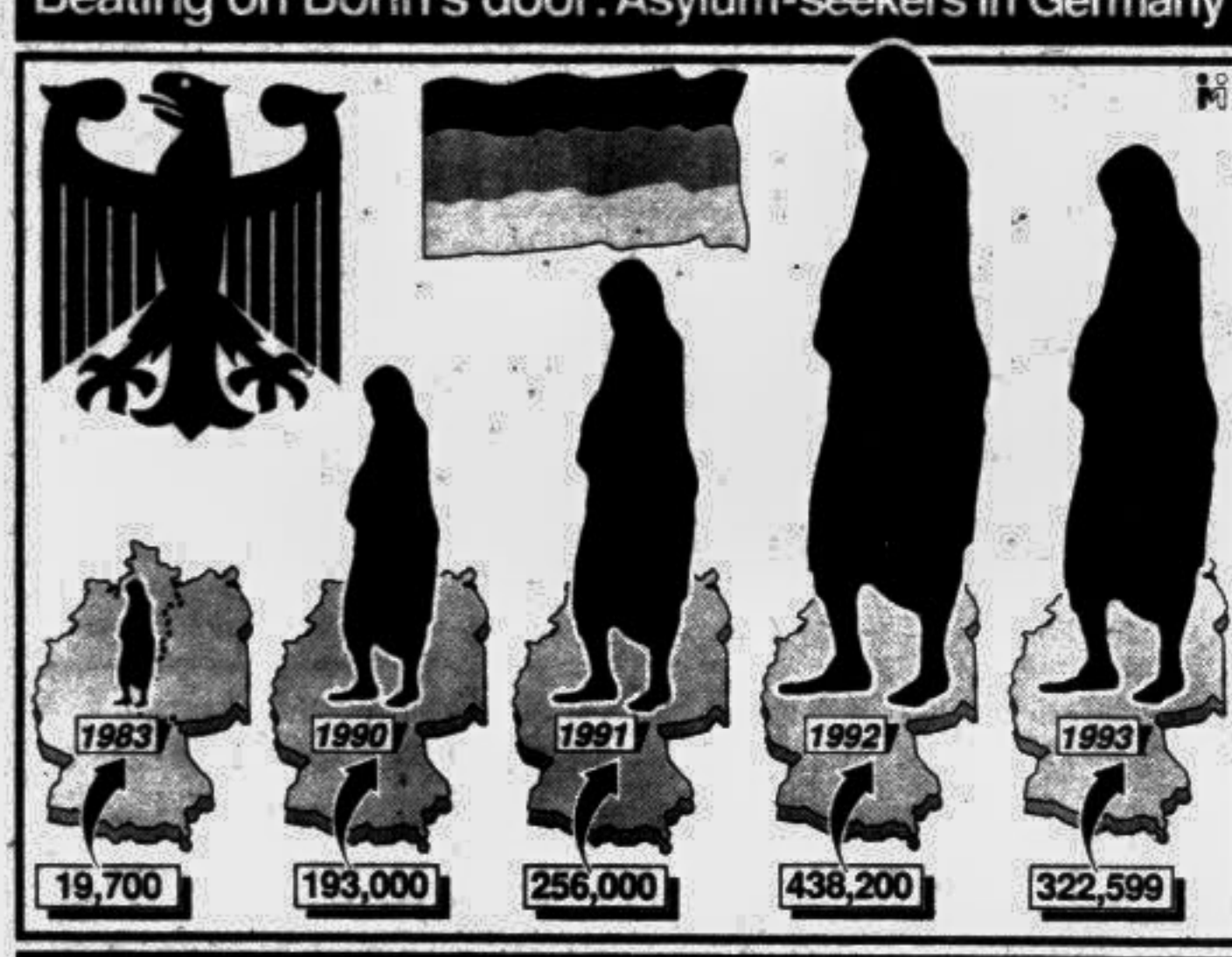
The Paul Gerhardt Parish is one of over 200 Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany that shelter foreign refugees — even when that protection violates the law.

Although the German churches, particularly the Protestant, have a long tradition of providing sanctuary for persecuted persons, the new, more restrictive German immigration policy has brought "church asylum" into the spotlight and the involved parishes into direct conflict with the state.

The coordinated network of church initiatives is a response of Germany's recently amended

The rise of racist attacks on immigrants in Germany has been accompanied by tough curbs on the admission of political refugees. Many churches have responded by sheltering refugees, even when it is illegal to do so. Gemini News Service reports on a clash between Church and State.

Beating on Bonn's door: Asylum-seekers in Germany



constitutional right to political asylum, formerly the most liberal in Europe.

Previously, refugees simply had to make it to the German border and ask for an application for asylum in order to enter the country and receive housing and pocket money un-

til their case came up before a court, often years later. Under the former laws, Germany accepted more foreign nationals than any other European country.

After a fierce debate, lawmakers finally voted to restrict and tighten the requirements

for political asylum. Since the amendment, the number of foreign nationals admitted into Germany has fallen by more than half. The trial procedure has been streamlined and deportations dramatically stepped up.

Critics argue that the priority of the new policy is to limit the number of foreign nationals entering Germany rather than to give political asylum to those who deserve it.

"On paper the right to political asylum still exists," says Ellen Wagner of the organisation Asylum in the Church, "but it has become so difficult to get that it's now more of a privilege than a guaranteed right."

Christian groups like Wagner's and Pax Christi, as well as human rights organisations such as Amnesty International, claim that legitimately persecuted people and refugees from war zones are being turned away from Germany to face life-threatening situations in their homeland.

Young men from Angola,

deserters from the Serbian army and Kurds from Turkey, for example, rarely qualify for asylum under the new laws. If the courts rule against them, they are incarcerated and quickly deported.

In Berlin, a coalition of Social Democrats, Greens and Christian Democrats has demanded an immediate stop to the deportation of Angolans, who are often suspected by their government of being sympathisers of the rebel UNITA army. On return to Angola, they could be confronted with criminal proceedings, torture and the death penalty.

Among the Angolans in Berlin, uncertainty about their cases has turned to desperation. Gabriel Mavonda, aged 21, recently threw himself from a fifth-story window after enduring a six-year trial.

"He thought that they were going to send him back," says his friend Simon, clearly shaken. "He just couldn't take it any longer. We're all scared that they'll send us back. What's the difference between dying here or there?"

The grassroots initiatives of the local congregations have found ever greater resonance in the church hierarchies. Leading Protestants, such as Wolfgang Huber, Bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg, have voiced their full support for involved parishes.

"Where Christians, Christian parishes and church leaderships are confronted with such cases, they have the moral duty to intervene on behalf of those concerned," he said.

The Catholic Church has also expressed its concern about the "callousness" of the new immigration policies and the "reckless" deportations. But the hierarchy, traditionally more conservative than its Protestant equivalent in social matters, refuses to take an official position on the issue. The decision to offer sanctuary is left to local churches. Advocates of church asylum point to the legacy of persecu-

tion, flight and sanctuary so central to the history of Christianity.

During the Second World War, some German churches illegally protected Jews and communists, while others collaborated fully with the administration. Since 1983, there have been over 2,000 cases of church asylum for people refused political asylum from the state.

Despite growing support in Christian circles, the possibility of a direct confrontation with the state has caused concern and back-peddling. Federal Interior Minister Manfred Kanther has warned the churches that they are not above the law. "There is no special right of church asylum," he said. "A legal right to political asylum already exists and that is granted by the state."

There have not yet been raids on churches sheltering illegal refugees. In Bavaria, one Protestant parish sheltering a Kurdish family eventually backed down when faced with police threats: 400 people had formed a human chain around the church to prevent riot troops from entering but, in the end, the family was handed over to authorities and sent back to Turkey.

Church organisers acknowledge that religious institutions are not above secular law. They point out that most refugees under church protection are not there illegally, but temporarily without housing or support. The church networks provide counselling services for refugees in a variety of languages.

"The purpose of church asylum is not to offer an alternative political asylum to that of the state," says Berlin Pastor Jurgen Quandt of Asylum in the Church. "For the most part, we're trying to win time or to get re-trials for those people who are in danger of being deported."

Church asylum is a last, emergency response when all legal means have been exhausted. But if Pastor Quandt is confronted with the dilemma of breaking the law of the state or that of God, his decision is clear: "There is a moral covenant higher than that of the state to which I am bound."

PAUL HOCKENOS is a freelance writer based in Berlin.

To the Editor...

Reduce tax on tea

Sir, Our tea this year is facing a very crucial time due to excessive tea production in the African regions. Nearly 60 to 70 per cent of our tea is exported to earn a good amount of foreign currency for our country but unfortunately its present price has declined simply to an alarming level vis-a-vis the cost of production of most of the tea estates. This situation will put most of the small companies in a great financial problem in running their estates. Large concerns will also be affected.

I would request the government to reduce the tax (VAT) on tea specially for this year considering the sharp decline in the price. Tea estates' loss can be minimised to

some extent if the tax is reduced. The step is required in the greater interest of our tea industry.

Motius Samad Chowdhury
Phulaha Tea Estate, Sylhet

Social acceptance

Sir, "No way out" (Star, Aug 15) raises the question of what is acceptable by the society in regard to display of affection publicly — including embracing, kissing, body touch. In the East there are mores different from the well publicised Western examples seen on the mass electronic media.

The police and the law come later. Discretion is the better part of valour. When in Rome, do what the Romans

do. This information age is changing the mores fast. Should we try to move faster than what the society does not accept? It is a debate to nowhere.

A Reader
Dhaka

Tolerance

Sir, In your letter column, someone asked the definition of a "fundamentalist". I think the question misses the point. At this time in history the key question is tolerance. If someone wants to dress in a certain way, etc, that is his right. But if someone prefers to dress in another way, etc, that is also his right.

When people are privileged or penalized for religious reasons, it is a threat to real

democracy and to sincerity in religion. The sentiments of all have to be respected, but a person's right to express his own viewpoints has to be tolerated — otherwise where will it end? There is a profound wisdom in the phrase "there is no compulsion in matters of religion". The West has discovered through fratricidal struggles the need for tolerance. Must we repeat their mistakes by forgetting a key part of Bangladeshi tradition?

Let no one quote British law to justify the suppression of freedom. British colonial law was made to fulfil the goals of British colonial policy. Bangladeshi law should fulfil the needs of a free people for human dignity.

A democrat